MICHELLE LEVY

Do Women Have a Book History?[1]

WRITING IN 2012 ABOUT THE EXTENSIVE SCHOLARSHIP STILL NEEDED ON women writers of the Romantic period, Anne Mellor urged that "we need broader studies of women's participation in the entire range of print culture in the Romantic era."[2] The first half of this essay explores the theoretical and methodological strategies by which we can begin to answer Mellor's call, by developing a woman's book history for the Romantic period. In doing so, I have been inspired by Mellor's example of significantly broadening the canon, as she has done throughout her career, in both her critical and editorial work.[3] Franco Moretti's related model of "distant reading" has also guided my approach, particularly his contention that in order to grasp a literary field as a whole, scholars must devise strategies that allow us to zoom out to take in a wider view.

The second part of this essay offers a specific case study of women's publishing history of the period, exploring an unexamined archive of the correspondence of 80 women with four publishing houses. The survey of this collection begins not only to broaden but also to revise our understanding of women's involvement in literary culture, putting pressure on received understandings of the print marketplace and women's professionalism within it.

1. Building Bridges: Book History and Feminist Literary History

Robert Darnton's 1982 essay "What is the History of Books?" proposed what became a highly influential model for conceptualizing such a history,

1. My title echoes Joan Kelly-Gadol's landmark essay, "Did Women Have a Renaissance?" in *Becoming Visible: Women in European History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977), 137–64, and Anne Mellor's own essay "Were Women Writers 'Romantics'?"

2. In "Thoughts on Romanticism and Gender," 346.

3. Mellor's influential anthology, co-edited with Richard E. Matlak, *British Literature 1780–1830*, contains author entries for nineteen women and selections from an additional eight, the broadest representation of female authors of any contemporary anthology; likewise, her *Mothers of the Nation: Women's Political Writing in England, 1780–1830* covers a very broad range of women writing in a wide variety of genres.

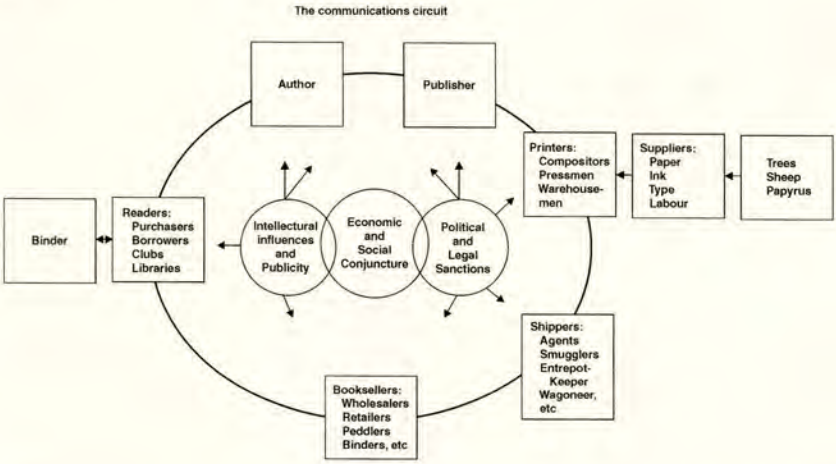

Figure 1: Robert Darnton, "The Communications Circuit," in "What is the History of Books?", 68.

that of the "communications circuit" (fig.1), a model depicting a circuit from author to publisher, printer, shipper, bookseller, reader, and back to author, as a means of describing the operation of the book trade in England and France during the print-era.[4] One of the most profound contributions of Darnton's model for literary scholars has been to re-embed authors within the larger fields of activity by which books were made and sold, distributed and read. As we know, the fantasy of the isolated writer was propagated by several Romantic poets, who figured themselves as did Shelley, as "a nightingale, who sits in darkness and sings to cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds."[5] Book-historical approaches have been instrumental in debunking this mythology of solitary genius, as literary scholars have productively used Darnton's theory to examine the social networks that enabled the production and dissemination of printed books. Darnton's famous diagram is, however, silent on the question of gender (as it is with respect to other important identity categories, such as class). What happens if we overlay gender onto this diagram? It becomes immediately apparent that whereas men (albeit of different classes) have occupied all positions along the circuit at all times, women have rarely done so. Scholars have begun to bring gender to bear on Darnton's model, with results that suggest

4. Robert Darnton, "What is the History of Books?", *Daedalus* 111, no. 3: Representations and Realities (Summer, 1982): 65–83.

5. Percy Shelley, "A Defence of Poetry," *Essays: Letters from Abroad, Translations and Fragments*, 2 vols., ed. Mary Shelley (London: Moxon, 1840), 1:14.

the importance of heeding historical and geographical variations. Some early modern feminist historians have usefully appropriated Darnton's model, in part because it has helped to draw out women's various contributions to print culture in a period when fewer women appeared in print as authors. Thus Maureen Bell, Paula McDowell, and Helen Smith have documented women's active participation in producing and disseminating texts, as printers and hawkers, publishers and sermonizers, compilers and collectors.

However, other early modern feminist scholars have contended that book history's focus on the printed book has tended to marginalize women. Margaret Ezell, for example, has repeatedly called attention to manuscript culture as a socially significant form of literary dissemination throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and one in which women engaged not only as authors but as editors and translators, patrons and copyists. Consideration only of printed books by women during the early modern period yields a highly distorted picture. As Jill Millman observes, "women's writing . . . when seen through the records of published books, produced a strange picture of women's literary history. The few women to actually have their work printed in the early modern period are very rich, very radical, or related to Sir Philip Sidney."[6] To provide a more representative account of women's writing, feminist scholars had to look beyond print, beyond traditional genres, and finally, beyond notions of solitary authorship, as early modern women's writing is rarely the product of a single individual.[7]

Some of these insights, however, appear to be of limited utility to understanding the practices of later eighteenth-century book culture. According to Isobel Grundy, after the early eighteenth century, women's "part in the actual production of books shows no sign of growth," and even shows signs of decline.[8] Whatever involvement women had in the book trades in the seventeenth century seems to have waned by the eighteenth, when it is largely dominated by men: of the thirty-eight publishers listed in *The British Literary Book Trade, 1700–1820*, only one is a woman (Anne Dodd), and her firm ceased trading in the 1750s. While further isolated examples have

6. Millman, "Introduction to The Perdita Project Catalogue 1997–2007" (Adam Matthew Digital, 2008), http://www.perditamanuscripts.amdigital.co.uk.proxy.lib.sfu.ca/Introduction/Content/EssayContent.aspx, accessed 12 January 2014.

7. One of the most important theoretical interventions is Margaret Ezell's concept of "social authorship," describing a set of literary practices by which handwritten texts were socially produced, circulated, and read. See her *Social Authorship and the Advent of Print* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).

8. Grundy, "Women and print: readers, writers and the market," in *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain 1695–1830*, eds. Michael F. Suarez, S. J. and Michael L. Turner, Vol. 5 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 146, DOI: 10.1017.

been found and likely more will be uncovered, the asymmetry that is present by the 1750s—with women featuring so prominently in the categories of author and reader whilst being so underrepresented in other categories—is unlikely to be significantly reversed. In our period, then, Darnton's diagram cannot be readily deployed to expand our understanding of women's involvement in print.

However, women's apparent absence from the circuit draws out one obvious but unnoticed effect: that they were compelled, exclusively, to negotiate with men. Men and women of this period occupied such disparate economic, social, and cultural positions that this asymmetry of roles demands greater scrutiny than it has hitherto received. At the same time, just as early modern feminist scholars like Ezell have articulated some fundamental shortcomings in book historical models, it may be that Darnton's circuit is too rigid to capture the full range of women's involvement in the production and dissemination of literary writing even during the print era. Because the circuit assigns discrete roles to various skilled trades or professions, as essentially a model of the commercial book trade, it obscures the overlapping and intertwined nature of the more informal practices by which many books were produced and circulated.

Thomas Adams and Nicholas Barker's 1993 refinement of Darnton's model (fig. 2), tracing the five events in the life of a book—publishing, manufacture, distribution, reception, and survival—by emphasizing activities rather than discrete roles, may help to excavate women's actual involvement with print, as gendered agents potentially occupying informal/fluid/overlapping roles. Just as many early modern women moved between activities of authoring, editing, collecting, copying, and circulating, my preliminary research suggests that many Romantic-era women were proxy-publishers of books, assuming financial risk and responsibility for marketing and distribution even if they were not professional publishers. A model that acknowledges how various roles along the circuit could be blurred or even collapsed is needed to capture the nature and extent of women's involvement in the period's literary culture. The fruitful potential for a conjoined feminist book history to reshape both the fields of feminist literary history and book history (and our understanding of the period generally) also lies in attempts to quantify women's contributions to the rise in printed output that characterized the closing decades of the eighteenth century. An important body of work has emerged over the past 15 years, by scholars including William St. Clair, James Raven, and Richard Sher, which seeks to measure and account for the print explosion that began around 1775. However, all of the explanations that have been advanced for the print boom, such as changes in copyright law, innovative bookselling practices, shifting demographics, and rising literacy rates, fail to address the

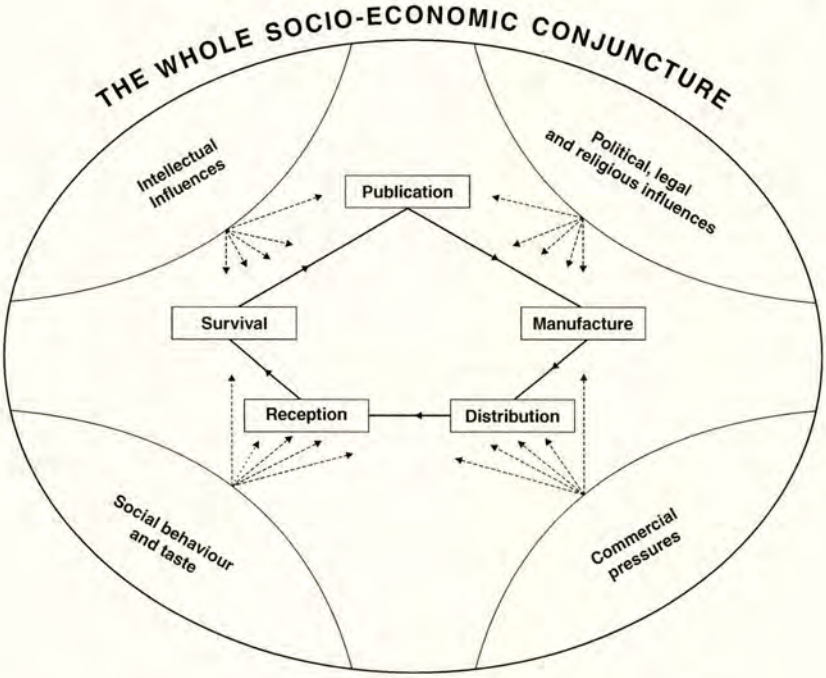

Figure 2: Thomas R. Adams and Nicholas Barker, "The whole socio-economic conjuncture," "A New Model for the Study of the Book," in *A Potencie of Life: Books in Society*, 14. Reproduced courtesy of the British Library.

signal role of gender directly. Only one chapter (out of 49) in Volume 5 of *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain 1695–1830*, Isobel Grundy's "Women and Print: Readers, Writers and the Market," is explicitly devoted to gender. Here Grundy asks, "What difference did women make to the book trade during the long eighteenth century?" and concludes that much remains unknown.[9] Indeed, we lack answers to basic (albeit challenging) bibliographical questions, such as the extent to which women fueled the expansion of the press. What we do know about the one genre that has been extensively studied, the novel, is that women were instrumental to its (quantitative) rise: during the period 1780 to 1820, new novels by women outstripped those of their male counterparts.[10] More research is

9. Grundy, "Women and print," 146.

10. For a detailed analysis of the publication of novels during the period, including a breakdown by gender (providing for the large number of anonymous works), see the introductions in Peter Garside, James Raven, and Rainer Schöwerling, eds. *The English Novel,*