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0521021456 - Gender and Language in British Literary Criticism, 1660-1790

Laura L. Runge

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During the eighteenth century British critics applied terms of gender to literature according to the belief that masculine values represented the best literature and feminine terms signified less important works or authors. Laura Runge contends however that the meaning of gendered terms like “manly” or “effeminate” changes over time, and that the language of eighteenth-century criticism cannot be fully understood without careful analysis of the gendered language of the era. She examines conventions in various fields of critical language – including Dryden’s prose, the early novel, criticism by women and the developing aesthetic – to show how gendered epistemology shaped critical “truths.” Her exploration of critical commonplaces, such as regarding the heroic and the sublime as masculine modes and the novel as a feminine genre, addresses issues central to eighteenth-century studies and still relevant today.

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Preface

A person unacquainted with literary studies asked me what literature I discuss in this book. To his surprise, I explained that I do not directly analyze literature. This is a theoretical work that posits a history of literary criticism in the eighteenth century to account for the way gendered knowledge shapes literary value. It obviously is not the only or, finally, the “true” history of literary criticism, but it offers an examination of conventions in critical language that tell a side of the story that has not yet been discussed. In doing so it complicates the understanding of the critical practice of the eighteenth century, which has implications for our own assumptions and commonplaces. I have structured the argument around several critical inheritances that inform the study of literature today. More importantly, however, the book opens up to inquiry the matrix of critical and gendered values through which eighteenth-century literature is produced. As such it re-signifies the critical vocabulary for analyzing those works, with particular attention to values or forms that have been denominated feminine.

The completion of this project is indebted to some dear friends and generous colleagues. I thank Martine Watson Brownley for her strong mentoring and support for my work. I am grateful to John Sitter for his judicious advice and instruction. The book gained much by the thoughtful readings and critical commentaries of Peggy DesAutels, Elisabeth Fraser, Bob Hall, Elizabeth Hirsh, Jo Parker, Ruth Whitney, James Winn, and most especially Carole Meyers. I also appreciate the comments of two anonymous readers from Cambridge, as well as the patient labor of my copyeditor Chris Lyall Grant. Parts of chapters 2 and 3 were previously published in different forms in *Essays in Literature* and *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, respectively. My greatest obligation and most pleasing to acquit is to Mark Gordon, to whom I dedicate this book.