University of Nebraska - Lincoln
DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Faculty Publications -- Department of English | English, Department of

2020

BOOK REVIEWS- Joanna Wharton, Material Enlightenment: Women Writers and the Science of Mind, 1770–1830

Stephen C. Behrendt
University of Nebraska-Lincoln, sbehrendt1@unl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/englishfacpubs

Part of the Comparative Literature Commons, English Language and Literature Commons, Modern Literature Commons, and the Reading and Language Commons

Behrendt, Stephen C., "BOOK REVIEWS- Joanna Wharton, Material Enlightenment: Women Writers and the Science of Mind, 1770–1830" (2020). *Faculty Publications -- Department of English*. 227.
https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/englishfacpubs/227

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications -- Department of English by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

BOOK REVIEWS

Joanna Wharton, ***Material Enlightenment: Women Writers and the Science of Mind, 1770–1830.*** Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2018. xii+276 pp. US$99.00.

Joanna Wharton's *Material Enlightenment: Women Writers and the Science of Mind, 1770–1830* is a recent addition to the interdisciplinary series Studies in the Eighteenth Century that Boydell Press (Boydell & Brewer Publishers) is publishing in association with the British Society for Eighteenth Century Studies. It is a welcome addition to the growing body of work that addresses the contributions of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century British women writers to areas of scientific, philosophical, and otherwise "learned" discourse that have historically been associated primarily—and in many cases exclusively—with male thinkers and writers. Wharton's study therefore helps to flesh out the picture of women's intellectual, imaginative, and cultural contributions to their times and their sociopolitical milieus that has been traced in greater detail in the areas of literature and the arts, as well as in political, social, and economic activism. Less widely remarked—and even less well examined—have been the remarkable achievements of British women like Caroline Herschel (astronomy), Etheldred Benett (often called the first female geologist), Harriet Henrietta Beaufort (botany), Elizabeth Fulhame (chemistry), Mary Somerville (physics), Lady Hester Stanhope (archaeology), and Maria Graham (travel writing). Women and the science of mind, Wharton's particular focus, has received even less notice, notwithstanding Alan Richardson's work (most notably his *British Romanticism and the Science of Mind*, 2001) and that of others (such as

The Wordsworth Circle (Fall 2019) © 2019 The University of Chicago. All rights reserved. For permission to reuse, please contact journalpermissions@press.uchicago.edu.

Jennie Batchelor, 2010; Sara Ahmed, 2010; and Richard Sha, 2018) who have followed.

Central to Wharton's discussion are the vexed circumstances of unconventional thinkers (of both sexes) like Dissenters, as Anna Letitia Aikin (Barbauld), her brother John Aikin, and her niece Lucy Aiken were, when it came to participation in the sort of philosophical debates that are at the center of *Material Enlightenment*. Locke's challenge to the conventional notion of innate ideas in the form of his counterparadigm of the tabula rasa asserted that human identity was the product of individual circumstances, a contention that essentially signaled the transition in eighteenth-century thinking away from character considered as a reflection of generalized and primarily *shared* matter(s) and toward a view that was grounded instead in what William Blake called "Minute Particulars." More importantly for women, "Locke's *Essay* [*Concerning Human Understanding*, 1689] fundamentally altered the terms of early feminist philosophy," elbowing out the old Cartesian dualist model of mind in favor of an alternative model grounded in the bodily senses that anticipated "the feminist potential of sense-based psychology" (9–10). Joanne Wharton proposes that despite their exclusion from the educational opportunities afforded their male contemporaries (including the medical profession), women nevertheless "engaged closely and enthusiastically with the 'science of man'" while risking much by engaging in the "precarious" activities of "speculation and disputation on the nature of mind" (7). Wharton cites Harriet Guest's perceptive observation that women writers' recourse to the language and discourse of sensibility in the context of the outbreak of war with revolutionary France at once signaled their exclusion from partisan political discourse and empowered them with the unbounded discourse of human feeling (*Unbounded Attachment: The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, 1992). As Wharton sees it, this rhetorical model enabled women to reimagine human society and women's place *within* it: not somewhere near the periphery but, instead, right at the center. However, although critical attention during the past two centuries has usually focused on the most radical feminists (Wollstonecraft, Hays, etc.), Wharton argues that the most culturally influential discussion among early proponents of women's potential as "thinkers" (and therefore social theorists) came instead from more predictably conservative, conventional women writers. Moreover, the notorious sexist attacks of male harpies such as Richard Polwhele (*The Unsex'd Females*, 1798) not only failed, ultimately, to repudiate and silence women

philosophers, but in reality served to identify and then reinforce a far more diverse and pliant affiliation than what Polwhele and his male colleagues thought they saw. This diversity of thought and community—and the extent to which the women involved recognized it, appreciated it, and cultivated it—is the real sociocultural achievement that Wharton sets out to delineate for us, demonstrating how and why we may profitably place in revealing intellectual "conversation" writers such as Barbauld, Honora and Maria Edgeworth, Hannah More, and Elizabeth Hamilton, in contradistinction to the more familiar constellation of Wollstonecraft, Hays, Helen Maria Williams, and other early radical feminists. The more complicated and highly nuanced assessment of the dynamics of Romantic-era women's involvement with the psychology of mind that Wharton begins to outline here draws on the work of scholars such as the late Mitzi Myers (on children's literature), Kathryn Sutherland (on More), Batchelor (on conduct literature), and Emma Major (on women and religion) in illustrating the often surprisingly intense involvement of the less radical feminist psychologists with one another's insights and imperatives. That mediated dynamic at the same time both fostered and illustrated a sense of interpersonal relations based not upon the more familiar and aggressively competitive masculinist model but rather upon a companionate model of community effort and shared discourse, a model whose troubling echoes of the egalitarian revolution across the Channel were of course quite evident among the alarmed male establishment.

Wharton's argument proceeds from her conviction that the signal contributions to the history of philosophy made by Romantic-era women are grounded in the physical, material aspects of human experience—in this case in the materiality of texts, according to which interpretation these authors "understood literature as psychology in motion" (27). Wharton's systematic examination of the work of five women writers assesses the emerging late Enlightenment opinion that physical, material objects—written texts in particular—possess a degree of agency through whose effects they may shape physical actions and both define and regulate social associations and behaviors. In the process, she contends, these writers drew ever nearer an understanding of physical matter as fundamentally active, not static, and therefore endued with social, religious, and political significance (29).

Wharton's case studies are Anna Letitia Barbauld (particularly her *Lessons for Children*, 1778–79, and *Hymns in Prose for Children*, 1781), Honara Edgeworth (*Practical Education*, 1798), Hannah More (*Strictures on . . . Female Education*, 1799, and *Coelebs in Search of a Wife*, 1808–9), Elizabeth

Hamilton (especially *Letters on the Elementary Principles of Education*, 1801), and Maria Edgeworth (especially *Practical Education*, 1798, with Richard Lovell Edgeworth; and *The Parent's Assistant*, 1800). Wharton cites Barbauld's Providentialism as a lifelong intellectual touchstone, tracing it through both that prolific author's Dissenting intellectual, cultural, and religious milieu and her voluminous literary production. Barbauld's characteristic emphasis on cultivating a "devotional" attitude both to the natural world and to human productions informs both her educational program and her often contestatory sociopolitical stance as represented in works as seemingly different as her prose *Sins of Government* (1793) and her controversial poem *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* (1812). Both of these works, however, Wharton observes, are rooted in the principles she articulated in those early works for children: "greatness" (by which she means *moral* superiority) is to be achieved not by means of "remedial" education, however well intentioned, but rather by that providential intervention through which individuals *and societies* learn through "mortification" to reject pride, luxury, and cultural domination and to embrace instead the salutary humility and moral steadfastness that result from an informed, nurtured sensitivity to the lessons taught by the physical, material world and its maker.

Wharton turns next to Honora (Sneyd) Edgeworth and her 1798 *Practical Education*, written in collaboration with her father Richard Lovell Edgeworth. Like Barbauld—both in intellectual inclination and in applied pedagogy—Honora Edgeworth adopts the Lockean principle of linking education with pleasure, seasoning didacticism with delight. What particularly distinguishes her, though, is her firm grounding in the efficacy of the "experimental science" of education in which her work played and important early role (74). A firm adherent of a disciplinarian approach to education (children must be "managed," "respectful," "obedient"), she was clearly no follower of Rousseau's more indulgent paradigm, as Wharton explains. And yet she was fundamentally "anti-despotic" both in theory and in practice. Indeed, a particularly fascinating aspect of this chapter is Wharton's discussion of how Edgeworth's notebook accounts of her educational theories relate to their application in actual practices. Wharton considers the notebooks both "as emotional objects and as knowledge objects," as "repositories of the psychological and physical growth" of her children, and then, later, as "artefacts of exemplary motherhood" (78–79). While not strictly despotic, it emerges, her pedagogy is nevertheless firm

in its reliance upon obedience and respect as "a necessary pre-condition of the educative process" (95), a fundamentally paternalistic process that she nevertheless envisions as benevolent and progressive.

In Hannah More we meet the energetic moralist eager to enlist Enlightenment philosophy in service to unswervingly conservative social and political ends. Wharton first traces how More began early on to apply to material and textual productions the associationism she learned from Locke. Then she turns to the "later" (1799 and after), when More adapted associationist techniques specifically to realign Enlightenment thought with—and in service to—evangelical Christian morality. In her *Strictures* (1799) More famously associated Mary Wollstonecraft with the "corrupting" influence of European thought and literature and its advocacy of female self-expression and self-empowerment. Hence in *Coelebs* (1808–9) she redefines the domestic space as a site for female self-sacrifice as part of a larger intellectual and sociopolitical project to "transform the hero of [conventional sentimental] romance into a Christian ideal" (118). In the "Mendip" schools that Hannah and Martha More founded, Wharton explains, "mechanistic physical employment" was enlisted to reinforce class barriers by not-so-subtly subverting popular democratizing efforts to expand literacy. Although favoring a strictly circumscribed curriculum combined with authoritarian pedagogy (children's "wicked ways" must be severely corrected), More nevertheless appreciated that the carrot was more effective than the stick and so adopted a sensory approach to education that was not unlike Barbauld's (More was in fact an admirer). It is not surprising, then, Wharton suggests, that More's Cheap Repository Tracts employ many of the same pedagogical strategies found in her schools and their materials, marshaled in this case to reeducate laboring-class adults into compliant loyalist citizens. By the time she reaches *Coelebs*, More has turned her focus still more directly to women, transferring to them the materialist pedagogy she had previously directed toward children and then toward (primarily male) laborers, redirecting the model of "Christian economy" visible in the *Strictures* and the tracts (149). In all of these efforts, Wharton points out, More's consummate skill as thinker, writer, rhetorician, and conservative ideologue ensured her extraordinary success in the literary market, however dimly we may regard her ideas today. She wrote with equal facility in the idiom of rich and poor, disenfranchised and privileged, and—as many of her contemporaries recorded—she was universally read. Her investment in a distinctly materialist Enlightenment

philosophy (and its sociopolitical potential) reflects the extent to which she hoped to harness that tradition (and its force) in service to loyalist, nationalist purposes.

Elizabeth Hamilton's *Elementary Principles of Education* (1802) Wharton situates solidly within the associationist tradition, too, regarding it as a somewhat differently inflected but nevertheless thoroughly Christian moral treatise despite Hamilton's intellectually "ecumenical" practice of drawing freely from the works of friend and foe alike when it comes to pursuing "truth." Interestingly, Hamilton cites her own limited education as an advantage: deprived of extensive formal education, she has learned from material experience, uninhibited by artificially imposed proscription. Like More and Barbauld, Hamilton yokes Lockeanism and Christianity to a single cart, regarding religion and psychology as "mutually illuminative" (164), recognizing that (moral) education begins with those experiential "building blocks" acquired starting in childhood where the majority of their teachers are women. In the process she observes that this especially formative function of women within education suggests one of the primary gender-based reasons why women's foundational role within the philosophical tradition in general has historically been insufficiently credited. Employing a variety of literary vehicles, including satire, Hamilton constructs a practical argument grounded in associationist psychology and built upon "experientially tested materials from sources both close to and far from home" (167). Much as poets like Wordsworth and Robinson drew their imaginative ore from mines of the ordinary quotidian world, so too did materialist philosophers such as Hamilton draw upon those same universally familiar and accessible material sources for their own democratizing exercises in philosophy and pedagogy. Near the end of her chapter, Wharton insightfully reminds us not to misread Hamilton's domestic ideology as an inherently conservative one unattuned to feminism, for "her writings proffer innovative, covert feminist strategies for power" in their appeal to union and impartiality. She "conceptualizes the science of mind as a comprehensive female philosophy; a domestic adaptation of embodied psychology that combines the religious, social and experimental" (194).

Finally, Maria Edgeworth is discussed, about whom more critical analysis has almost certainly been written than about the others whom Wharton considers here, and whose home Wharton describes as "a space that was populated by knowledge objects" (197). Again, that emphasis on the formative value of *object*, of material *things*, underpins the author's thoughtful

analysis of Edgeworth's various books as "psychotechnologies of Enlightenment" (200). From *The Parent's Assistant* (1796) through her late novel *Helen* (1834), Wharton contends, Edgeworth's attention is seldom far from metaphysics and the science of mind, nor is there for her any functional distance at all between art and science, which are inextricably linked in the worldview that Maria Edgeworth derived from and shared with her father. As Wharton neatly and succinctly writes at this chapter's end, Edgeworth's novels are "repositories of inventions" whose "intertextual mechanisms animate the text," requiring of their consumers an explicitly "industrious" variety of reading. Yet while her writing seems both to demand and to direct materialist readings, those writings nevertheless "speak to the vital necessity of the literary imagination to material Enlightenment" (230).

In sum, then, it is worth noting that Wharton acknowledges—and appropriately stresses—what too few cultural critics of the Romantic era have acknowledged: that some of the most popular, influential, and persuasive writers of the period were women whose stand on "gender politics" was decidedly conservative and even downright reactionary. Like so much of cultural criticism, that which addresses Romanticism typically embraces the new, the progressive, the contestatory, the rebellious while repudiating the staid, the conventional, the conservative, the mortally didactic. And yet, to do so in this binary fashion is to misread and oversimplify the rich rhetorical, intellectual, sociopolitical, and cultural dynamism of this remarkable era. Just as Romanticism studies have begun to expand the field's parameters to include the physical sciences, technology, and industry, is fresh attention being paid to parallel advances in psychology, physiology, and medicine, and in the process finally beginning adequately to trace and credit the remarkable contributions to all these areas also of women. As we reformulate our understanding of what Romanticism both was *and is*, Wharton's *Material Enlightenment* contributes meaningfully to this important project of recovery and reassessment.

Stephen Behrendt, University of Nebraska
DOI: 10.1086/707200