An Odd Attempt in a Woman. The Literary Life of Frances Brooke. Lorraine McMullen. *Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1983. Pp xvii, 243.*

In 1748 Frances Brooke, a young Lincolnshire woman raised among a family of country clerics went to London to seek a living as a writer. To anyone familiar with traditional literary history, which consists of famous male authors and occasional aristocratic female dabblers, this is a remarkable fact.

We do not know why the twenty-one-year-old Frances Brooke felt either interested in or capable of becoming an independent woman of letters. She had been educated at home by her mother and an uncle in the fundamentals of reading, writing, arithmetic, and French, as well as those of singing, dancing, and needlework. It was a legacy left by her cleric father at his early death that enabled Brooke to travel to London. There, amazingly, this ordinary looking woman succeeded. She published poetry, a heroic classical tragedy in blank verse which was well received, and went on to write a pastoral and a farce. She produced a weekly paper that ran for the better part of a year when she was thirty-one. The paper, a series of *Spectator*- like essays, was written in the persona of its title, *The Old Maid.* During this time Brooke married a clergyman fifteen years her senior. The need for money did not abate with her marriage; a son was born in 1757 and her husband was absent much of the time, as a ship's chaplain.

Brooke's life as a popular London scribbler is entirely typical of the age. She knew Samuel Johnson, David Garrick, and was associated with Richardson's circle. She translated a French novel of sensibility, memoirs, and a history of England. She wrote her own novels of sensibility, tragedies, comic operas, and a travelogue-novel that has become known as the first Canadian novel. She may have produced other anonymous hack-work of which we have no record.

All this goes to illustrate her biographer Lorraine McMullen's remark that:

> Many eighteenth-century women writers, well known in the literary world of their time, are now minor or marginal figures. In the early years of the novel, they were far more numerous—and far more successful—than is generally realized. (xi)

It is just such a "revised" literary history that McMullen has written.

It is difficult to judge how renewed interest in Frances Brooke, in particular, has come about. Certainly in Canada, it is based partly on authorship of *The History of Emily Montague* (1769), an epistolary novel of sensibility. There is also reason to believe that she wrote a second "Canadian" novel published in 1774. The Brookes spent five years in Canada (1763-68) mainly in Quebec City, where John Brooke had been appointed a chaplain after the defeat of the French. In writing *Emily Montague*, Brooke showed her adeptness at not just one conventional mode—the Richardsonian novel—but two, for a travelogue about the recently acquired Canada was equally as appealing to British readers.

It is thus at least as much in her conventionality as in her unconventionality that Frances Brooke attracts our notice, for her choices articulate the context in which more famous writers made their careers: the pseudo-classical tragedy, the novel of sensibility, the interest in things French, the popularity of history and travel books. However, there is no evidence from McMullen's study to suggest that Brooke has been grievously underrated, and McMullen's comment that in the heroine of *The Excursion*, "Frances Brooke has provided us with the closest character in the eighteenth-century novel to a female Tom Jones" (188), rather underestimates the differences between *The Excursion* and *Tom*

Jones. Only in an historian's summarizing of literary plots could they come to seem alike.

In fact, Brooke's achievements are more interesting in outline than in McMullen's telling of them. McMullen's prose is not heavy-footed, but neither is it provocative. Understandably caught up in the sheer amount of pioneering research that her subject has required, McMullen tends to allow banal detail to overwhelm her narrative. The subject is a good one but could have been bettered by leaving some of its hard won details out. Yet at times—most jarringly in the way the deaths of Brooke and her husband casually turn up amid reviews of one of Brooke's plays—details seem to desert McMullen's prose. Between these two extremes Brooke never quite comes to life. Her career is felt to be of interest but not interesting.

It may simply be that McMullen is more of a literary historian than a biographer: "In reconstructing Frances Brooke's life and work, we reconstruct the literary world of her time."(219) McMullen's preface and conclusion thus show a clearly thought-out notion of what is being attempted by retelling the life of Frances Brooke. Perhaps it was a life and world without much passion—so this history would seem to imply. But it is curious that the works themselves tell us otherwise.

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The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer. Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley and Jane Austen. Mary Poovey. *Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984. Pp. xxii, 287, cloth (Series: Women in Culture and Society);*

Fantasy and Reconciliation. Contemporary Formulas of Women's Romance Fiction. Kay Mussell. *Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1984. Pp. xix, 217, cloth (Series: Contributions in Women's Studies, No. 46);*

Insatiable Appetites. Twentieth-Century American Women's Bestsellers. Madonne M. Miner. *Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1984. Pp. 158, cloth (Series: Contributions in Women's Studies, No. 48);*

Women Writers in Translation. An Annotated Bibliography. Margery Resnick and Isabelle de Courtivron. *New York: Garland Publishing, 1984. Pp. ix, 272, cloth (Series: Garland Reference Library of the Humanities, vol. 228).*

Traditional criticism's systematic derogation of women's writing, and in the particular context of the works reviewed here, of women's fiction especially, is of paramount importance in any discussion of feminist criticism, and it is therefore gratifying to find three studies which, in their own ways, take on the problem. In this respect, however, despite its claim to be a work of feminist criticism, Mary Poovey's *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer* is critically the most conventional in its approach. Poovey's detailed examination of the works of Wollstonecraft, Shelley, and Austen in the light of their social and personal contexts, while interesting in itself, adds little that is new to the understanding of each writer. The strength of this study lies more in its general ideological thesis, of which the three writers are on the whole convincing examples. Poovey's identification of "the discrepancy between the promises of bourgeois ideology and the satisfactions that life in bourgeois society actually yields" is not at all surprising, but her further conclusion that "in the early nineteenth century this most general of all contradictions was experienced in an intense form by women and, particularly, by women writers" is amply justified not merely by her general discussion but also by the large number of specific