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Review of *British Women Novelists and the Review Periodical*, by Megan Peiser

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BRITISH WOMEN NOVELISTS AND THE REVIEW PERIODICAL, by Megan Peiser. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2026. 168pp.
\$64.95 paperback; \$64.95 ebook.

When thinking about canon formation, literary critics often reference reviews as an explanation for a work's centrality or obscurity. In *British Women Novelists and the Review Periodical*, Megan Peiser begins with an example very relevant to Burney studies: Burney's address, in *Evelina's* (1778) preface, "To the Authors of the Monthly and Critical Reviews" (qtd. in Peiser 1). Peiser's focus on these two review publications makes this a relevant and convincing place to begin, as she notes that Burney's familiarity with these publications "highlights the degree to which eighteenth-century readers and authors acknowledged book reviewing as a known and central system by which publications were cast into the hands, minds, and memories of readers" (1).

In her monograph, Peiser gives us more context for the impact of reviews on women's novels in particular, and in doing so shows how such novelists had more agency over the reviews of their work than it might at first appear. For Peiser, it is all about reconstructing (as much as we are able) the context in which reviews were published and read, and in which women novelists participated as the authors of some of the most popular works of the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century.

There is more context for Peiser's own book as well. The reader of *British Women Novelists* is encouraged to read the book alongside the database Peiser has curated, *The Novels Reviewed Database, 1790-1820 (NRD)*. The NRD is available as an

Excel spreadsheet on bibsites.org; Peiser describes the dataset as “a curated edition of the literary system of book reviewing of English novels from the Romantic period, specifically of those published in the *Monthly* and *Critical Reviews*” (12).

Peiser encourages her readers to place *British Women Novelists* alongside the *NRD* in order to navigate the contextual details necessary for a more complete understanding of her argument: scholars “are provided with the edited text of the reviews and an accessible tool for reading *and* using that data” (15). This extremely innovative approach makes this book one of the more participative scholarly monographs I have read.

In response to this invitation to explore the *NRD*, I visited bibsites.org and downloaded the spreadsheet. The *NRD* dataset is easy to navigate, and Peiser includes instructions for how to use it (also at bibsites.org). Included in Peiser’s dataset are entries for reviews of publications the two periodicals suggested were novels, with information about where to find digitized versions of the novels and the series, volume, and pages of both *Critical* and *Monthly Reviews* for these novels. Peiser also often includes an excerpt from the review so that we can get a sense of the tone of the two periodicals’ reception of each author’s work.

Novels of interest to Burney scholars in the dataset include: Sarah Harriet Burney’s *Traits of Nature* and *Tales of Fancy* Volumes I and II as well as Elizabeth Meeke’s *Something Odd!* (1804), which provides a supportive example for Peiser’s argument about women novelists’ parodic prefaces (Peiser 59-60). The context that the *NRD* offers is only one way in which Peiser’s book brings together many threads of information.

This is because *British Women Novelists and the Review Periodical* makes an argument that is complex and interlocking,

but which Peiser lays out in such a careful and cumulative way that the reader never feels lost. In her first chapter, Peiser discusses the ways in which these review periodicals were read (and expected to be read) at the time of publication and in the years that followed publication. She defines two key ways of reading the Reviews: “chronicle reading,” which involves reading the periodical as it is published and each number from “front to back” while amassing information and knowledge from one issue to the next (22), and “catalogue reading,” which involves reading only a targeted article, which the reader accesses because of need or interest and with the assistance of an index (23).

One way of reading does not preclude the other, and Peiser explains how the authors of the *Monthly* and *Critical Reviews* are aware of these different reading styles. She shows how reviews might reference earlier numbers or even call back to jokes from previous reviews of an author’s work with the expectation that the reader will understand the context. This is the type of reading that is difficult to replicate in modern scholarship, because as Peiser notes, “our reliance on digital surrogates for accessing many rare historical periodicals is wholly incompatible with recreating historical reading practices” (22).

This type of reading also includes a dialogue with women novelists, which Peiser tracks with nuance in chapter two, as she considers the extent to which these authors held more sway over periodical reviews than modern scholars typically assume. The dialogue as she tracks it occurs in the prefaces of women’s novels, which the *Monthly* and *Critical Reviews* replied to and even excerpted. One example Peiser provides is of Anna Maria Porter’s preface to *Artless Tales* (1790), which she refers to “as

the second voice in this conversation, responding to Review critiques with formulated conventions and expecting, or instigating, a reply in-kind from the Reviews” (Peiser 54). Peiser makes several astute observations because of her contextual research; among the most significant (in my view) is the extent to which these two review publications castigated women authors when they included personal information in their prefaces (56, 78-84).

A particularly stark case of this kind of criticism provides Peiser with the subject of her third chapter: “The Rise and Fall of Charlotte Smith, Novelist.” This fascinating re-contextualization of literary critics’ understanding of Smith’s reception history is essential for anyone writing, reading, and/or teaching about or with her works. Peiser charts a conversation between Smith (in her prefaces to novels published between 1789 and 1802), and the *Critical* and *Monthly Reviews*, as she responds to their criticism of what they deem as her inappropriate inclusion of biography in her works (Peiser 80).

When Peiser pieces this conversation together for the modern reader, she provides a significant feminist literary-historical context that continues to be relevant for professional women today. Even now, institutions pressure marginalized people, including women, to keep their personal lives separate from their careers. When Peiser shows her reader not only *that* but also *how* Charlotte Turner Smith said “no” to this systemic requirement, she also shows that bibliographic work is feminist work.

But *British Women Novelists and the Review Periodical* leaves the best and most exciting case studies for the final chapter, titled “A Study in 55 Novels: Data Trouble and

Resistant Narratives in the Novel's History." In this chapter, Peiser's attention to disability, gender, and sexuality is commendable for its acknowledgement of the gaps that quantitative research such as the *NRD* can replicate if not paired with qualitative perspectives. Peiser looks at fifty-five novels that do not fit neatly into the genre distinction of the novel, and considers why and how the Reviews (one or both) ended up treating them as novels. In considering this, she comes across marginalized publications that mirror the spaces of their authors, two of whom she researches in more depth. Peiser explains her choice of these two texts because they "frustrate current genre boundaries *and* feature authorships by people with intersectional identities" (98).

These authors are: Althea Fanshawe, author of *Easter Holidays* (1797), which is a combination of educational text, religious work, and fiction that Peiser notes is better understood alongside Fanshawe's diary, in which she talks about living with disability; and Ethelinda Potts, a queer woman who was estranged from her husband, lived with her partner, Sarah Langford, and who wrote and revised her poetry, titled *Moonshine* (1814), with special attention to her relationship with her children. Somehow, the *Critical Review* categorized this text as a novel, perhaps based only on title (Peiser 110). Of *Moonshine*, Peiser notes that it "highlights exactly who and what circumstances we silence when we try to occlude the untidy parts of our data" (111). In this last chapter, Peiser does exactly what the *Monthly* and *Critical Reviews* were so dismissive of: she combines biographical research with literary studies and bibliography to piece together the contexts in which Fanshawe and Potts wrote and published themselves into the world.

Using the analytical tools she carefully lays out in the earlier chapters of the book, Peiser shows how a combination of quantitative and qualitative research can lead the attentive researcher to that which does not fit. She muses, “Perhaps a move away from rigid data-collection methodologies, which I admittedly adhered to in creating the *NRD*, would, like the reviewing system, offer up more such avenues for divergent authors and narratives to enter our literary history” (110). This is a call to action and a significant observation about the need to attend to the absences and ill-fitting parts of historical research.

In her postscript, Peiser eloquently discusses the need to attend to a multiplicity of voices and to their absences so that we can recover what we did not know existed; in *British Women Novelists and the Review Periodical*, she models what this work can and should look like.

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