Narrating Women's History in Britain, 1770-1902

Miriam Elizabeth Burstein, The College at Brockport

Description
In her powerfully argued and thoroughly researched book, Miriam Elizabeth Burstein demonstrates the significance of popular women's history for the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century historical imagination. By analyzing how early women's history was practiced by both women and men, she shows that it did not evolve straightforwardly into the women's history we know today. Burstein traces the narratives of women's history through canonical novels by Sir Walter Scott, W. M. Thackeray, and George Eliot; Enlightenment philosophical history; the biography collection; sermons and didactic literature; and periodical articles. As this listing indicates, women's history was neither invisible nor subversive. Quite the contrary: it was an integral part of popular historical thinking, and its protean nature allowed it to be appropriated and practiced by everyone from conservative evangelicals to radical suffragists. Many writers used women's history to define the meaning of both modernity and historical consciousness itself. Novelists in particular found that women's history served as a convenient shorthand for theorizing and representing historical change, but at the same time they also revealed its internal tensions. By tracing women's history across multiple genres from the Enlightenment to the late nineteenth century, Burstein shows that there was no easily identifiable 'tradition' of women's history, although many writers of the time attempted to construct one (as many still try today). In the end, she argues that jettisoning older claims about women's supposed 'invisibility' in history, as well as about the subversiveness of her appearance therein, allows us to revitalize questions about women's 'voice,' of 'writing women into history,' and, indeed, of 'marginal literature' itself.

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