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## Review of: Elizabeth Kraft, *Women Novelists and the Ethics of Desire, 1684-1814*

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Review of: Elizabeth Kraft, *Women Novelists and the Ethics of Desire, 1684-1814*

**Abstract**

Book review

Enlightenment and in the literature and history of eighteenth-century Britain. Readers of twentieth-century postcolonial literature should also find it of interest. Still, Hawes's book will appeal most of all to scholars who identify themselves as specialists in the eighteenth century. His vigorous defence of the period doubles as a useful defence of the field—no mean accomplishment in this time of shrinking department budgets and vanishing tenure lines.

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Elizabeth Kraft. *Women Novelists and the Ethics of Desire, 1684–1814*. Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 2008. viii+200pp. US\$99.95. ISBN 978-0-7546-6280-8.

*Women Novelists and the Ethics of Desire, 1684–1814: In the Voice of Our Biblical Mothers* departs from current historicist orthodoxy by organizing its reading of the long eighteenth century around large ethical questions that take female desire, and women's right to articulate that desire, as their starting point. Drawing on the philosophies of Emmanuel Levinas and Luce Irigaray, Elizabeth Kraft advocates desire's relational aspect as an avenue to the divine. The prophet Isaiah's words, "Here I am; send me," underpin a biblical ethics of generosity and response central to the dynamic Kraft traces in her readings. Stories of heterosexual love, in particular, uphold the ideal of reciprocity and responsibility, providing occasions for women to insist on their inclusion in the narratives of desire and the divine that are central to Judeo-Christian culture.

Chapter 1 establishes the theoretical and biblical frame of reference governing the study as a whole. The conversation that has evolved between Levinas, Derrida, and Irigaray on ethics and sexual difference structures Kraft's analysis of the stories of Abraham, Sarah, and Rebekah. The chapter concludes with reflections on the Song of Songs, whose female lover insists on sexual difference as the ground for an ethics of desire. The pastoralism of the Song of Songs then serves as the central motif for a reading of Aphra Behn's *Love-Letters between a Nobleman and His Sister*. In the Edenic grove of Bellfont, Silvia and Philander "come together in one being while preserving their discreteness as individual and sexual beings" (49). Chapter 3 uses the template provided by the stories of Deborah, Jael, and Rachev to explore Behn's and Delarivier Manley's representations

of the relation between sexual desire and political consciousness. In chapter 4, the trope of hieroglyphics in Manley's *The Adventures of Rivella* and Eliza Haywood's fiction takes us back to Esther and her use of sign and symbol in the palace of King Ahasuerus. The story of Moses and Miriam frames Kraft's reading of Samuel Richardson and Sarah Fielding in chapter 5, with Fielding serving as the corrective to Richardson's ambivalent relation to the authority of women's speech. Chapter 6 jumps forward half a century to the suffering women of Charlotte Smith's *The Young Philosopher* and Frances Burney's *The Wanderer*, each of whom channel the spirit of Hagar, "the heroine of the Romantic era" (194). The study concludes by circling back to Elizabeth Inchbald's 1791 novel, *A Simple Story*, and the story of Lot and his daughters. The fear of the stranger, the demands of hospitality, and the breakdown of family relations write themselves into the story of a Catholic-Protestant marriage. Despite the failure of the marriage between Lord Elmwood and Miss Milner, a new order appears out of its ashes in the final union of Matilda and Rushbrook: "the narrative trades the ethics of the cave, the love of the broken, fearful father, for the face-to-face encounter between 'beings wholly otherwise'" (177).

This study proves fresh and original in its pairing of biblical stories and narratives of desire in the long eighteenth century. But some historical imprecision attends its methodology. For instance, Kraft's sense of the Bible's pervasive influence as an offshoot of common Christian practice fails to account for the specificity of the culture wars that emerged between libertine and Puritan constituencies in Restoration England. Libertinism's interest in freedom from constraint specifically aimed at freedom from theocracy and its claims to scripture-based authority and providential historiography. Behn's anticlericalism, writ large in her translation of Fontanelle, reminds us to take her allusions to scripture with a grain of irony. The Edenic setting of Silvia's seduction, for instance, only heightens our sense of Philander's treachery, already established in the narrative by his involvement in treasonous plots against the king. More generally, I am not persuaded by the claim that libertinism upholds an ethics of reciprocity organized around heterosexual relations. For women authors such as Behn, the attraction of libertinism resides in its willingness to complicate categories of difference, including those of sexed bodies and the cultural standards that attend them. If occasionally we glimpse intimations of sexual parity between lovers, more often we witness a world of Hobbesian struggle. Those characters in the narratives of Behn, Manley, and Haywood who cling to the prerogatives of gender are the first to fall in the carnage of human sexual relations their fiction so often describes. Silvia and Philander meet

each other on common ground not as lovers but as friends, long after their affair has ended.

The historical moment that birthed English anticlericalism also witnessed an unprecedented number of religious publications by women. If libertinism's amatory qualities encourage reflections on desire, the commitment to biblical hermeneutics on the part of writers such as Elizabeth Rowe and Penelope Aubin make these women, to my mind, the true inheritors of the matriarchal biblical tradition Kraft describes. To be sure, they do not celebrate erotic union in the terms Kraft finds compelling. But desire more broadly defined motivates their interest in establishing new literary paradigms that afford women a voice as ethical subjects.

Kraft's pairing of biblical texts and eighteenth-century narratives is better suited to the latter half of the period, when the Enlightenment asked questions about human rights in terms that more closely resemble Levinasian paradigms. It would be interesting to explore the tension between biblical example and novelistic form at this historical juncture. Does the novel move towards a more fully secularized sensibility after Richardson, or does the rise of Romanticism lead it back to prophetic and visionary traditions? Further attention to the specific religious controversies of the later eighteenth century could add a political dimension to this discussion. How do the ethical challenges of reciprocity and respect that Kraft describes look when set against the backdrop of the Gordon Riots and government efforts to ease restrictions against Catholics? *Women Novelists and the Ethics of Desire* provides us with a rich vein of material and reflections to mine in future years.

**Alison Conway** is associate professor of English at the University of Western Ontario and the author of *Private Interests: Women, Portraiture, and the Visual Culture of the English Novel, 1709–1791* (2001) and *The Protestant Whore: Courtesan Narrative and Religious Controversy in England, 1680–1750* (2010).