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Family Histories, Literary Time

Margaret J. M. Ezell

The title of a recent book by David Perkins – *Is Literary History Possible?* (1992) – is an indicator of the wide range of anxieties which now beset a critic contemplating writing in that genre. Although Perkins opens by declaring that, “I am unconvinced (or *deconvinced*) that it can be done,” his work as a whole actually suggests that writing literary history is indeed possible, but that it is fraught with dangers, noting as he does that “literary history comes at a very high cost,” and in Perkins’s eyes is perhaps doable only by the elect (11, 184). The literary historian, like John Bunyan’s Christian, must not only battle hostile landscapes dotted with Apollyonic reviewers and the Vanity Fair of Immanence Theory, but also Sloughs of Despond generated by the historian’s own self-consciousness of his or her invasive position in attempting such a formidable task. Perkins does offer a glimpse of a shining city of mutual understanding, but only if the peripatetic literary historian resists the temptation of strolling off the path to investigate what Perkins calls “literary sociology,” which he describes as being “indistinguishable from history or historical sociology,” and whose findings do not “much interest literary readers” (177).

I take the counter position, however. Not only do I believe literary history is possible, but I also believe that it is high time that as an academic discipline it becomes acquainted with the very disciplines which Perkins, seeking to keep literary history safe for Formalism, deplors. I feel that in particular, in the study of the history of the family, we find scholars who since the 1960s have been grappling with the issues of the constructed nature of the past and the imperfections of linear narrative to encompass cultural phenomena. Compared to literary history, family history is a relatively new discipline; in its attempts to understand and to represent the family in history and in its confrontations with traditional methods of narrative social history, I believe that we can find new and fruitful ideas for dealing with a series of problems which now seem to bring the attempts to write about the history of literature and literary experience to an uneasy halt.

Although my examples will be taken primarily from English and American literary histories, it strikes me that there is no barrier to the application of the methodologies we find in family history to other national literatures and periods; family history as a discipline is transcultural, originated by English, American, and continental historians working in unison.

In the late 1980s it seemed that this phenomenon – literary history defined as “problem” – might be resolved by a group of critics lumped under the titles “new historicists” and “cultural materialists” (White 173). Writing in the 1970s and ‘80s, Stephen Greenblatt, Jonathan Goldberg, Louis Montrose, and Jonathan Dollimore, to name only a few, offered controversial “historical” readings of Elizabethan texts; simultaneously, textual critics such as Jerome J. McGann and Alan Liu were confronting the dual domains of textual editing and the ideologies of Romantic studies, asserting the notion that a text is a cultural product, a material artifact. In their introduction to the collection of articles entitled *New Historical Literary Studies* (1993), “The Historicist Enterprise,” Jeffrey Cox and Larry Reynolds define the multivalent collection of essays which includes both Greenblatt and McGann as being “new historicist” not for unity in subject matter or even in methodological approach, but rather in the authors’ shared distance from “old historicisms” through a “lack of faith in ‘objectivity’ and ‘permanence’” and through their “stress not upon the direct recreation of the past, but rather the processes by which the past is constructed or invented” (4).

Simultaneously, however, with the celebration of “new” historicism, we are also reading articles with titles such as “The Theoretical Limits of the New Historicism” and “The Vanity of Historicism,” the latter declaring that what it terms “superhistoricism” consists of “a series of unfortunate mistakes [. . .] substitut[ing] relativism for skepticism [. . .] mistak[ing] historicism for historicity; and finally, [. . .] vastly exaggerat[ing] the scale of what they were trying (rightly, no doubt) to turn against” (Rée 976-77). Perhaps most interestingly, new historicists have been accused of not being very well-informed about history. Perkins, for example, points to the arbitrary nature of the choice of context practiced by Greenblatt and Liu, while Richard Levin asserts that most of the new historicist generalizations about what was or was not present in the Renaissance are interpretative in the same fashion as the critics they intend to replace, that new historicist paradigms of the past are simply substitutions rather than revisions or new methodologies. Levin refers to them as “negative claims,” which as much as the old historicisms, “homogenize Renaissance thought [since] their claims that no one then

could have held some ideas are just as universal as the old claims that everyone must have held some ideas" (Perkins 1992, 121-52; Levin 437). Finally, as feminist readers of new historicism such as Judith Newton and Felicity Nussbaum have pointed out, even in the new histories attention remains focused on the patriarchal, and the new histories as such have made little effort to consider gender issues or to include women writers in their analyses.¹

While I personally have gained much from reading many different new historicist critics and find some of the criticisms of them to be more reductive than penetrating, nevertheless, that literary history as a hybrid genre still has problems seems undeniable. Writing in 1970, the historian Hayden White pointed to the conflict between critics who "assume that literary *history* is the problem and those who assume that the problem is *literary history*" (173). His quizzical remark points to the heart of the dilemma – what is the relationship between literature and history, between writing about literature and writing about history?

Basically, for scholars of previous generations, to write literary history has meant to mediate between two traditionally different scholarly projects. The problem we face today which earlier practitioners did not, is that the "literary" side has lost much of its former critical stability and closure through the advent of deconstruction and new formalisms, and for the literary scholar the historical side also has become problematic through the turn against "old historicism" by the "new." Unfortunately, while we have the old historicism being challenged by the new, the new historicism in turn seems to leave unfulfilled many expectations. In my opinion, a good part of the current frustration with literary history writing arises from the fact that the critics of various versions of literary history, whether old or new, have assumed that we all mean the same thing by "history" – that is to say, while literary methodologies may change, "history" remains constant. In moving from the "old" history to the "new" historicism, critics have focused on changing the theoretical model by which we *link* literature to history; meanwhile, the historians themselves have been changing the very definition and nature of history itself as well as incorporating new methodologies from other disciplines.

¹ For an overview of the conflicts between feminist historical scholarship and the new historicist work, see Judith Newton, "History as Usual? Feminism and the 'New Historicism,'" in *The New Historicism*, ed. H. Aram Veeser (New York: Routledge, 1989), 152-67, and the introduction to *The New Eighteenth Century: Theory, Politics, English Literature*, eds. Felicity Nussbaum and Laura Brown (London: Methuen, 1987).

It is worth our time to look again at the methodological positions of the seemingly "golden age" of unproblematic literary history. Although we now dismiss early "institutional" histories as critically naive and although their representations of the past are rightfully questioned by several "postmodern" perspectives – ranging from new historicists to the critics of new historicism such as Perkins and Levin – it is also true that the basic "problem" of the relationship between historical study and "literary" historical study remains open and that the two seemingly different models share numerous presuppositions about the past and about historiography. We will continue to have these critical anxiety dreams, I believe, until we are able to recognize the methodological dilemmas created by history writing as such which were faced by our predecessors and find ways not to constantly repeat them. In these earlier texts which are distanced from us, we can see some of the presuppositions about literary history which continue to plague us under different rubrics.

The critical stress factors upon the genre of literary historiography have not always been present in these different categories. Indeed, as Perkins notes, the amalgamation of period history studies with aesthetic criticism has had a long and happy run (1991, 1). By placing literary texts in a historical framework, nineteenth- and early twentieth-century practitioners argued that "juster" interpretations of texts could be made and literary works could be more fully appreciated by the general reader; literary history wasn't seen as a problem, but as a solution to the cultural alienation of the general, nonspecialist reader. Through reading literary histories, one became possessed of one's national heritage, one's literary family album, as it were. In literary history, we were repeatedly told, we could "see the man," and "know the thoughts of a generation." Interestingly, literary history at the turn of the century also made extensive use of metaphors and models of development based on a notion of the "family" to explain literature – within genres, literary texts are frequently depicted as going through human life cycles – infancy, maturity, and in some instances, decline and decay.

One of the first things one notices when reading literary histories written at the end of the nineteenth and start of the twentieth century, either of a period or a national literature, is this confident certainty of the purpose and value of the enterprise of literary history. The 19th-century scholar's clear sense of the dual mission of literary history for Anglo-American scholars – to illuminate great works by placing them in historical context and through great works to reveal the spirit of an age – re-emerges in the 1920s and '30s in discussions over the "scientific" vs. "humanistic" study of literature.

In 1922, the presidential address at MLA stressed the need for literary history to investigate the still unexplored aspects of literature, and proposed a series of topics for future literary histories:

Are there forms of literature and themes which persist through the centuries unchanged by time or by passing from one nation to another? [. . .] What relative values have differences in religion, organization of the family, relation of the individual to the state, and the like, as causes of the transformation of the stock themes of literature? [. . .] Do new themes and new techniques come usually from men of recognized genius or not? [. . .] Are there periods during which literature bears no relation to national life? (quoted in Coffman, 500)

Such questions as these – is literary value transhistorical? what is the relation between the subject as creative subjectivity and the subject as constrained by an external power? – while quite different in expression are quite similar in thought to those found in new historicism, but they seem unmarked by our postmodern concerns. Instead, a commentator on this speech pointed with confidence and pleasure to the power of literary history to illuminate previously dark areas, offering as an example A. O. Lovejoy's *The Great Chain of Being* (1936) whose thesis was that “in literature the concrete outlook of humanity receives its expression” and in literary texts, the critic can “discover the inward thoughts of a generation” (quoted in Coffman, 503).

In this same spirit, in 1929 Edwin Greenlaw addressed the MLA on the “province of literary history.” Greenlaw declared that its “purpose is to study the history of civilization through literature, rather than to study authors and their works as isolated phenomena” (x). Referring to literary texts as “transcripts of life,” Greenlaw believed that “literary history concerns, as Bacon would say, the record of the lives of men of letters, the influence upon them of the life about them and of their life in books, and the writings themselves. [. . .] Literary history looks on literature as one phase of that history of the human spirit which is one of the chief learnings, [and] is humanism itself” (36). Questions about whether or not there was anything odd about the lack of great women of letters did not trouble this contemporary of Virginia Woolf. Questions about the relationship between history writing and literary history, likewise, are tactfully avoided.

When one turns to the literary histories themselves which were produced leading up to and during the first part of the twentieth century, one finds a common set of methodological approaches and metaphorical constructions which seem to govern their contents. For example, when one turns to

Hippolyte Taine's influential *History of English Literature* (1895), it is clear from its opening paragraphs how the literary text is to be used as a historical document: it forms "a transcript of contemporary manners, a type of a certain kind of mind [from which] one might retrace, from the monuments of literature, the style of man's feelings and thoughts for centuries back" (1). Taine sees literary history as primarily a tool by which the present can recover a living past: the literary historian's role is to "study the document only in order to know the man" and literary history is the pursuit of "a system in human sentiments and ideas; and this system has for its motive power certain general traits, certain marks of the intellect and the heart common to men of one race, age, or country" (2, 9). For the purposes of study, Taine divides the data into three types or "sources" of dominant characteristics which "produce this elementary moral state – the race, the surroundings, and the epoch" (12). "If these forces could be measured and computed, one might deduce from them as from a formula the specialties of future civilizations" (18). He concludes his "Introduction" by stating that "it is [. . .] chiefly by the study of literatures that one may construct a moral history, and advance toward the knowledge of psychological laws, from which events spring" (26).

The problems or anxieties present in practising literary history at the present moment are clearly highlighted in these confident declarations of the purpose and methods in the literary histories we received from our predecessors. Whether or not one professes humanism as the final goal, we have become aware of the extent to which humanism as a cultural construction can restrict as well as liberate thought. Even the phrasing – "men of genius," "men of letters," "spirit of a nation" – sits uncomfortably for many of us, reminding us that although the labels are grammatically inclusive, the histories produced by these generations typically did *not* explore the psychology, spirit, or writings of over half of the population, and that the official, representative experience and institutions of humanism as well as of literary institutions and nations was male and from a particular social group. For Taine, all of history could be encompassed in examining race or nation, surroundings or political context, and epoch. For those of us now, for example, who are interested in women's experiences and women's literary activities, there is an obvious and pressing need to continue to "engender" this history and its traditional methods of scholarship which, because they did not take gender into account as a significant factor, do not enable us to analyze different types of literary experience.

Even if we consider the presentation of only male writers as a group, we are left to wonder in these sweeping histories about those men who somehow escaped participating in supposedly universal sentiments. We lack earlier critics' flair for ruthless historical amputation when confronted by anomalies or simply massive amounts of texts: in 1915, the unfortunately named Prof. Krapp was able to take care of such problems by announcing in his "Preface" that, "the author has assumed the liberty of saying nothing about works and about writers that, to his mind, required no mention [. . .]; it would be unkind for the literary critic or historian to attempt to rescue insignificant names from the 'poke of oblivion' where time in its mercy has permitted them to rest in peace" (xiii).

Examining these positions on a microlevel, we see that the metaphors which form the structures of the literary histories of the early twentieth century also reveal a common set of assumptions about narrative and about history which cause us to pause in the present day. Literary types typically "grow," "rise," and "flourish," in botanical or bread-making fashion; in John Mackinnon Robertson's *Elizabethan Literature*, eighteenth-century literary efforts are described as Elizabethan styles which "ran to seed, as the phrase goes" (10). Relying on organic metaphors rather than mechanistic ones, earlier literary historians implicitly offer a deterministic structure for their histories around a pattern of birth or origins, growth or development, and in some cases, decay or decline. Krapp, for example, observes sadly that, "Old English prose is to be respected, but it was never highly developed as an art, nor was its vitality great enough to withstand the shock of the several conquests which brought about a general confusion of English ideals" (vii). Amusingly, the sensitivity to literary rot and dying genres varies from period history to period history; if you consult Robertson's *Elizabethan Literature* you would be alerted to avoid the poetry and prose of the seventeenth century and the "Augustan period," as representing the best of the Elizabethan gone to seed, "constrained," "fettered," and "less dignified," while in Wedgwood's *Seventeenth-Century Literature*, these very same periods are in the process of "develop[ing] a rich maturity," representing "the confident and fertile youth of modern English" (Wedgwood 4).

The metaphors chosen to represent the task of the literary historian are likewise revealing about the assumptions driving the design of the historical narratives. One of the most frequent metaphors employed by early twentieth-century literary historians is that they are "surveying" a "landscape" in order to "map" it. Wedgwood opens her account by declaring: "A short general history of English literature in the seventeenth

century can give no more than approximate directions for crossing a complicated, various, and sometimes clouded landscape. Before certain famous views every guide must halt: that mountain peak is Milton, this delightful grove is Dryden" (1). J. J. Jusserand opens his *A Literary History of the English People* (1912) equally disarmingly:

Many histories have preceded this one; many others will come after. Such is the charm of the subject, that volunteers will never be lacking to undertake this journey so hard, so delightful too.

As years go on, the journey lengthens: wider grows the field, further advance the seekers, and from the top of unexplored headlands, through morning mists, they descry outlines of countries till then unknown. (I, v)

Jusserand goes on to combine the roles of the historical cartographer with that of the literary botanist, describing how the historian confronted with this unexplored country must investigate the country "across barren moors and frozen fens, among the chill rushes and briars that never blossom, till those Edens of poetry are reached" (I, v).

In using this notion of the historical past as landscape, the historians are also indicating their principles of navigation, or narration. We find Edmund Gosse lamenting in his *A History of Eighteenth Century Literature* (1911), that "the vast landmarks of the preceding century, the colossal Shakespeares and Bacons and Miltons, are absent here [. . .] the general level of merit is much higher, while the solitary altitudes are more numerous but considerably less commanding" (vi). The concept that "that mountain peak is Milton," recurs repeatedly, with "great" figures looming out of the landscape to form "landmarks" for organizing and understanding the whole while lesser figures get assigned lesser topographical roles: thus we can imagine a Restoration topography of Dryden the grove, and, one can only project, the Earl of Rochester the bog, and women writers (other than Katherine Philips and the Countess of Winchilsea, the shrubs), not at all.

When we turn to the more recent institutional histories, such as the volumes of the *Oxford History of English Literature*, begun in the 1930s but often not completed until twenty to thirty years later, we find clearly marked this notion of historical narrative as organized around "monumental" figures who represent the spirit or the psychology of the age. Times changed, however, between the assigning of the contracts and the appearance of the volumes. Reviewers of these volumes were quick to point to their vulnerabilities. A review of C. S. Lewis's *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century* (1954) reveals, in addition to the wonderful fact that one could pur-

chase a nearly 700-page hardback Oxford book for only \$7, that "taken as literary history, one must reluctantly call it a disappointing performance [. . .] aris[ing in part] from the author's dislike of the period he is dealing with" (Bradner 19). The reviewer continues that "Professor Lewis apparently does not believe in literary history. He divides the century arbitrarily into Late Medieval, Drab ('not used as a dyslogistic term') and Golden ('the epithet is not eulogistic') [. . .] within these periods he discerns no growth or change. The drabness of the Drab period never improves; there is simply some kind of geological upheaval and there are Sidney and Spenser on the other side of the fault line" (20).

Likewise, Bonamy Dobrée's *English Literature in the Early Eighteenth Century* (1959), following in the tradition of Taine and Gosse, comes in for censure for its organization around "the great figures, Defoe, Swift, and Pope," with approximately one third of the 700 pages devoted to three individuals. As with Lewis's volume, the conceptual labels for different periods caused problems. The reviewer points out the vacillation on Dobrée's part, where he declares on one page that the period "could not be called an age of reason," only to state on the following page that "it may well be named the age of reason, so long as no pejorative sense is implied" (Bond 139). The reviewer notes, "this is not an unfair example of the kind of difficulty the literary historian encounters when he attempts to characterize a past age not in its own terms but by the use of critical clichés" (Bond 139). Of course, one could say here that the new historicisms arose to offer us a more self-conscious relationship with the past which might enable us to avoid such critical clichés, but our continued scepticism about it indicates that we are not convinced that the difficulties presented in these earlier modes of literary history have been solved.

The problems of literary history writing we have inherited from these late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century predecessors underlie Perkins's opening query about whether literary history is still a viable critical mode. The tendency of traditional literary histories to declare as their goal the recovery of the "spirit" or the "psychology" of some arbitrarily defined segment of time, whether that segment was determined by political events or literary ones, seems to us to be a goal both impossible and delusional – delusional in the sense that it suggests to the reader that the historian can absolutely, completely reconstruct a "living" coherent past. As we have seen through feminist and Marxist cultural critiques of this type of history, such control and certainty about the past is generally obtained through the silencing, negating, dismissing, or reconfiguring of any disparate voices and

texts. In earlier epistemologies of literary history, the historic past was represented as a type of static surface, a landscape which could be mapped: it had definable landmarks, which by definition must be unmoving. While the literary "vegetation" on its surface underwent organic changes, growing, developing, and declining, the fundamental layer of history as the past was envisioned, like the land underneath landscape, as constant and homogeneous, except in those extremely rare moments of traumatic upheaval.

Such a vision of unity, homogeneity, and regularity can only be generated from an analytical position based on the "representative" rather than the particular and furthermore it can only be sustained through privileging certain groups' experiences. In short, traditional literary histories adopted an analytic posture which valued certainty, closure, and linearity as the goals and means of explanation. From the position of a scholar interested in the process of the definition of what is "representative" and what is "anomalous" and in "en-gendering" history, the existing models of literary history, even those of the new historicism, still seem inadequate and beset by methodological problems which do not permit one to explore fully the type of data which is available. The journal *Representations* is still interested in the representative, even if that notion is artfully complicated.

How does one escape from periodization in writing literary history? How does one narrate the experiences of "non-representative" authors? These are such uncomfortable questions. The concept of literary history as the linear chronicle of a "spirit" of a nation may be easier for us to shed, but we must also be aware of the epistemology underlying it. Even if one is not a cultural materialist, the appeal of the metaphorical construction of literature as a "system" which behaves according to "organic" laws is undeniable. We *like* thinking in terms of literary forms being "born," of novels having "fathers and mothers" while "rising," and even of women writers "developing" a voice – we are comfortable with these metaphors to the point that they seem "natural" if not inevitable. However, in continuing to use unselfconsciously such metaphorical constructs, many based on the human life cycle and family relationships, we also continue many of the problems which have left us unsatisfied with the monumental, authoritative histories of our predecessors. We seem caught between our desire for a comfortable and comforting family metaphorical system and our frustration at what it limits us in doing.

That some form of literary history writing seems still to be necessary was revealed in a recent e-mail bulletin board exchange on student "bloopers" on the 18th-Century Discussion List, where, for example, one novice literary

historian was immortalized for writing an eloquent essay about "Locke's mock epic, *The Rape of the Pope*." Perhaps no methodology would prevent such historical confusion, but I will suggest that several of the most pressing concerns and anxieties about the practice of writing literary histories can be fruitfully addressed by turning to those exact fields and types of analysis of material culture which Perkins finds so antithetical to "true" literary history.

The field of "Family History" in particular appears to me to have much to offer to those interested in seeking alternatives to traditional literary historical methodology. At first glance, however, its possible contributions to the writing of literary history may seem somewhat meager. What can "family history" tell literary scholars? In the most general and basic sense, it can, of course, change the questions we ask texts and about texts. Initially, one might be tempted to think only in terms of subject matter for analysis and securing new data to confirm contextual studies or background data: how many children did Lady Macbeth's contemporaries have and at what intervals? Did Englishmen habitually have orphaned gypsy children living in their homes, seducing their females? Was Juliet experiencing prepubescent lust or budding maternal instincts? The list of contextual questions is endless. But beyond such entertaining questions as these, family history can offer the literary historian much to think about in terms of methodology, the analysis and narration of cultural phenomena, and history writing.

Unlike literary history, which came to flourish in the nineteenth century and enjoyed roughly a century of popularity and power, family history as a subject field with its own methodologies and institutions came into existence during the last two decades, about the same time as the related field, "women's history." In America and Britain, for example, we had the debut of *The Journal of Family History* in autumn 1976, shortly after *Feminist Studies* (1972), *Signs* (1975), and *The History Workshop: The Journal of Socialist and Feminist Historians* (1976). Family history and women's history challenged the traditional formulations of the writing of social history in many of the same ways as postmodern, new historicisms have problematized the writing of literary histories. Additionally, the field of family history itself has been the site of numerous methodological confrontations both from traditional social historians and from practitioners within the field who debate the virtues of quantitative vs qualitative methods; in its short disciplinary life, the field of family history has had to undergo intense examinations of its principles and practices by both Anglo-American and Continental historians.

In 1971, Tamara Hareven observed that previous historians' treatments of the western European family "were generally limited to institutional treatments, with occasional allusions to changes in the manners and mores in society:"

Childhood and youth, insofar as they were discussed, were treated in a monolithic, idealized fashion, as if they remained the same throughout history. Little attention was given to the possibility that the meaning of various stages of the life cycle changed over time, and that the treatment, perception, and experience of the stages of human development differed in various societies and among different social groups. (1971, 399)

Sounding very much like critics of traditional literary histories, Hareven points to established historians' concerns with the new project (including as an example in her footnotes an article whose title foreshadows Perkins's – Edward Saveth's "The Problem of American Family History"):

even those historians who recognized the importance of the family were awed by practical considerations: the scarcity of documentary materials and the feeling of inadequacy in dealing with the social sciences. Yet, as more recent work has demonstrated, the obstacle was not only in a lack of methodology or materials, but in the failure to ask certain questions. (400)

In order to generate not only new materials, but also new questions, in Hareven's opinion, "future studies will [. . .] have to continue along two complementary levels: first, detailed studies of family experience within distinct communities or limited time periods, [. . .] and second, investigations of macro developments over time," pursued from an interdisciplinary perspective, and "utilizing the tools of demography and the conceptual models of anthropology, psychology, and sociology" (1971, 412, 401).

Speaking in 1978, Peter Laslett, the English historian, opened a conference plenary address by observing, "we are met today at the largest gathering which I have ever attended, which had to do with family history" (1978, 432). In this talk, Laslett laid down some of the principle concerns over the development of the field, which he and the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure pursue to this day. In speaking of the family as a topic for historical investigation, Laslett sounds rather similar to recent literary critics interested in early modern women writers: both parties are aware of the importance of their relative subject

matters, both topics form the basis for infinite casual, informal argument, but, as Laslett observed,

it is extraordinary to me that until very recently the *history* of the family has scarcely been mentioned, except perhaps in one particular way. Whenever people get worried about the family in their own time, they are tempted by a particular view of its past. They begin to insist that there was once a time when the family worked, when it did all those things for its members which the family has ceased to be able to do in the world they now inhabit. (1978, 433)

As Laslett was at pains to point out in the very early days of the field, taking the anxieties and concerns of the present as the methodological core for investigations of the past results in limited perception of "the world we have lost."

By the 1980s, the field of family history had developed sufficiently for retrospective review articles to ponder "whence, whither, and where." The concerns expressed about the limitations of traditional methods and about the directions of family history are very familiar to literary historians today. Lutz Berkner writing in 1973 saw three dominant lines of inquiry – studies of particular social classes; demographic history and household analysis, and local and regional studies (395). Lawrence Stone, in 1981, refined and expanded the areas in the field to five: demographic, which is concerned with establishing the parameters of birth, marriage, and death; legal, which concerns the laws and customs governing lineage, kin, and inheritance; economic, which concerns the family as a unit of production and consumption; social, which concerns the evolving structures of various groups; and psychological and behavioral, which concerns the way people have treated one another, their values, states of mind, and emotions, and is also known in France as *histoire de la mentalité* (Stone 55).

What does this overview of methodologies which jointly make up the multi-national, cosmopolitan field of family history offer to those interested in re-visioning literary history as a vital critical model and in particular to those interested in en-gendering literary history? First of all, it is a field aware of its own methodological weaknesses without carrying along the burden of several centuries of entrenched theoretical positions. As Stone noted bluntly, a major weakness in family history is that lack of information about "90 percent of all who have lived in the past except the bare facts of their births, their deaths, and perhaps their marriages" (56), a frustration experienced by any critic interested in early modern women's experiences

and women's texts, but not one that would have been acknowledged by the model of traditional history. Unlike literary historians, family historians and demographers could hardly take the position that women did not participate in any significant degree in giving birth or dying and therefore need not be included; gender became a key issue in family studies early in its conception. In a wonderfully titled article written in 1987, "The Character of Familial History, Its Limitations and the Conditions for its Proper Pursuits," Laslett points to "the almost entire absence of women and children and of family relations in the [previous] accounts of the past [as] the clearest illustration of how that history failed to be a history of all people all of the time" (1987, 265). By 1991, the whole issue of gender as an analytic category had been foregrounded by feminist historians such as Louise Tilly who challenged family historians not to subsume the experiences of women in the past into the only domestic unit (Tilly 1987, 33).²

Likewise, our concern in literary history over closure and achieving a coherent, complete narrative of the past is necessarily confronted by a discipline involved with gathering statistical data about early modern periods. In his essay on the character and limitations of family history, which first appeared in the tenth anniversary issue of *The Journal of Family History*, Laslett opens by noting that "in reality we have no direct, unequivocal insight into families and familial life in the past [. . .]. Our activity [. . .] is a theory laden activity." For Laslett, however, this is a working condition, not a stopping point: "the recognition of what we shall never know might be called the beginning of wisdom for the historian of the family" (1987, 272-3). Such declarations are not intended to point to the *impossibility* of the project, but to warn against the tendency to substitute what he calls "inferential impressionism" for a conscious, critical evaluation of the nature of the data available. Especially in the early days of a discipline still in the phase of gathering data, he offers as a genuine, positive goal to "get as close as we could to what might be called the threshold of informational darkness," but also warns that "a great deal of what we find ourselves doing consists in the discovery of our ignorance" (271, 273).

Our concern with literary history's tendency to dwell upon the mountain tops and avoid the plains below is also addressed by family history. Combining demographical analysis and narrative sources, historians such as

² See also Tilly and Miriam Cohen's "Does the Family Have a History? A Review of Theory and Practice in Family History," *Social Science History* 6 (1982): 131-79; Joan Kelly-Gadol's "The Social Relation of the Sexes: Methodological Implications of Women's History," *Signs* 1 (1976): 809-23; and Gerda Lerner's "Placing Women in History: Definitions and Challenges," *Feminist Studies* 3 (1975): 5-14.

A. E. Wrigley and Margaret Spufford have reconstituted the life of small English communities in specific case studies. Turning its gaze from the national to the local, this branch of family history has provided the foundation for further studies of migration between villages and towns, of the life cycle experiences of different populations in different parts of Britain, and, in studies such as Ann Kassmaul's, the parameters of urban and rural servants moving within a society. This type of study, which refocuses attention from the national centres of population to the daily round of small town or village life, gives us a history of a large class of people which only merited footnotes in more traditional histories.

In citing these examples of the variety of work being done in the field of family history, I am not here attempting to make the case for the interdisciplinary, multi-theoretical field of family history as the perfect model or solution to our literary problems. Within its own discipline, there are already bitter turf wars, summarized in a 1991 review article as a division between those who focus "primarily on sociology, demography and quantitative techniques and those who are concerned with aspects of *mentalité, la vie intime*, and a general openness to new approaches" (Censer 529). These tensions between the Anglo-American statistically-oriented studies and the continental psychological ones, indeed, sound almost too familiar to those of us who were students during the structuralist/deconstructionist vs traditionalist debates. I am suggesting, however, that in the same way family history and its methodological shifts challenged and refreshed traditional social history, its techniques, analytic categories, and internal confrontations offer us a way to reconceptualize literary history so that it is more than merely "possible" to do future literary histories, but, indeed, the genre may experience a new direction and a new vitality.

In brief, family history as a field brought to social history new topics for discussion and new methodologies to analyze and interpret cultural experience. Although the five groups listed by Stone may seem a grab-bag, they do share certain epistemological positions: there is a fruitful confrontation of quantitative analysis with the interpretive assumptions of qualitative analysis; there is a conscious attempt to write history "from the bottom up," or to have a history of the general population rather than of a small elite; there is a preference for "thick description" drawing on several different disciplines in narrating past experience; and there is a determined effort to get rid of "clock time."

Rather than speculating whether or not literary history is dead or should be so, let me come to my conclusion by speculating about new possibilities

which could come out of a new sense of the nature of historical inquiry. Clearly, from the point of view of someone as I am interested in engendering history and recovering women writers and women's writings from earlier periods, I would welcome a more sophisticated attempt to quantify literary activity in general. In family history it is called "reconstitution," and is typically performed to obtain a demographical profile of a village over several generations. Rather than be content with narrative models and metaphorical inferences which focus on the silence and scarcity of women writers in early modern periods, I would like to know how many women published and what types of texts; furthermore, I would like to know how many women were contributing to what rare book and manuscript librarians typically describe only as "family papers."

I would like to read literary history in which the author was not grappling with the ghosts of formalism and new criticism but instead attempting to see what could be responsibly known about the acts of writing and reading in the past. I can imagine the possibility of literary histories which attempt to be the history of all the people rather than a guide to cultural icons. I would like to read a "thick history" of a single year in which the attempt was not to find the representative, but to be inclusive, in order to better understand the context of women's literary experiences within that of the literary culture as a whole.

Following the example of family history, I would like to see this type of analysis extended to studying literature as a regional as well as national phenomenon. When one consults a history of "English" literature, it would be easy to have the impression that all authors lived in London, with the possible exception of the Lake poets. People living in Scotland or Ireland are generally relegated to their own separate histories as though they did not speak and write in English, or they are made "honorary Englishmen," either through their association with genuine, i.e. famous, Englishmen of letters or because like Swift, they just fit so well within the canon. While we have monumental "influence" studies, which trace similarities in ideas and style between the continental and English texts, we know little about manuscript circles which were structured around country regions and even less about how literary connections were made and maintained between writers and readers in different parts of England, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland and between different regions and the continent. I would like to know, furthermore, how the citizens outside London and the university towns participated in the literary world; how, for example, the people in Bemerton, George Herbert's parish, got their books, which they certainly did, or those

living in Cyst St. George, Devon, where Mary Chudleigh grew up. How did people living in small villages and in country manors participate in literary life? What was the literary flow between the counties and the cities?

But perhaps the most intriguing direction in which family history points us is in the insistence of family historians such as Hareven and Laslett on getting away from the notion of "clock time" as a useful analytic measure of change. Laslett prefers "social structural time," by which he means "pace of change, or tempo, rather than time itself [. . .] the issue of importance to family history is that it is a mistake, an ordinal error once again, to put the family into the wrong category of pace of change" (1987, 273). Clock time also denies the relative nature of human experiences marked in time: Hareven offers the distinction between "family time" and "historical time," where historical time is a "linear, chronological movement of changes in a society over decades or centuries" while "individual lifetime is measured according to age." Age, however, as Hareven points out, demands a social context: "social age is different from chronological age," she notes, "in certain societies, a twelve-year-old is an adolescent; in others, he is already an adult; in certain societies, a person of fifty is middle-aged; in others, he is old" (1977, 59).

The rejection of "clock time" suggests other questions which concern literary historians. Clock time is the artificial, mechanical designation of linear chronology divided into discrete units to mark change. Julia Kristeva, following Nietzsche, calls it "cursive time," and describes its nature as "time as project, teleology, linear and prospective unfolding; time as departure, progression, and arrival – in other words, the time of history" (11, 13). Hours, days, years, centuries, all are involved in this sense of time progressing in orderly, discrete, uniform segments which obviously enable us to control and to organize experience. As Kristeva notes, "a psychoanalyst would call this 'obsessional time,' recognizing in the mastery of time the true structure of the slave" (13).

To control the definition of time and to define its contents has always been an implicit goal of traditional histories, whether social, economic, military or literary. Equally obviously, most human experiences apart from television programmes and school class periods don't actually fit neatly into clock or cursive time: babies persist in being born not on the hour or the half hour, kings and poets linger on a few years into the next century before dying, and even great events occur in awkward chronological spots (those who teach the "so-called" seventeenth-century literature courses which run from 1603 to 1660 know what I mean, as do those who must explain to

perplexed undergraduates why the eighteenth century can be either “long” or “short” but in either case probably won’t make it up to 1800).

The old historicism attempted to organize clock time with epoch labels, “the Enlightenment,” the “Romantic era,” “the Age of Transcendentalism,” but as we have seen, this merely substitutes problems. This practice, called “mundane time” in archaeology, is the notion of time in large blocks, usually referred to as the “ages and stages” method. Closely related is the notion of “typological time,” which implies in its labels “a qualitative dimension and is exemplified by paired terms such as traditional/modern, preliterate/literate, peasant/industrial, or Lévi-Strauss’ ‘hot’ and ‘cold’ societies” (Stahl 237). Both of these notions of time are distancing devices, based on a concept of progressive, linear change. In literary history, new and old, we feel its attraction still: we thus happily discuss the “infancy of the novel,” or American literature’s “Gilded Age,” or English “Renaissance drama” as well as contemplate the “modern” vs the “postmodern.”

There are alternatives, however, to this epochal notation of time found in our literary histories. One thinks, for example, of Kristeva’s contrasting notion of “monumental time,” which she describes as a conception which “englobes [. . .] supranational, sociocultural ensembles within even larger entities” (11). This concept of time which “essentially retains repetition and eternity from among the multiple modalities of time known through the history of civilizations,” is a model of time she links to the feminine, or female subjectivity (473). This notion of time as surpassing neat, finite boundaries, of containing within itself not only repetition but also chaos, bears some relationship as well to time as investigated in physics: time as relativity, the time/space continuum, the existence of chaos, and of infinity.

Such alternative conceptions of time suggest further alternative possibilities for literary history writing. Kristeva envisions “woman’s time” as a project for mapping the future, but is it not possible to consider it as a means to revisioning the past? Can we imagine the past outside the container of “historical time,” discussing the past without demanding that it progress through a system of closed oppositions, without it being bound by the time markers designated by political history? Is there such a thing as “literary time” in the same way that historians have conceptualized “family time”?

First, following the example of family historians, we can avoid topological time sequences such as the “infancy of printing” or the “rise of the novel” and we can avoid discussions which locate MSS culture as “pre-print,” its activities “traditional” or “tribal,” and stop searching for “the first”

female anything. To remain in these terms of analysis is to remain locked into a closed system based on denial, negation, and constriction.

We can also participate in a new sense of historical time by reconsidering the way in which we have in both old and new histories tended to treat texts as frozen in a single historical position. In general, literary histories have treated literary texts as static events, whose appearance in history is marked by an event, usually by the year they are printed, which is a discrete point on a linear chronology. In short, the texts have been treated the same way as battles, elections, deaths, and marriages, events occurring once at a single point in time, perhaps repeated or reprinted, as the case may be, but nevertheless finite, singular events.

But are texts in terms of literary history really static, single events? For those of us interested in manuscript culture, the texts are not so easily confined to a single point in time, nor do they progress neatly through revised, improved, and expanded editions as do print texts. As Gerald Bruns points out in his discussion of "originality" in manuscript texts, while print "closes off the act of writing and authorizes" it, the manuscript text "is not reducible to the letter" (44, 55). I would expand this point to suggest that manuscript texts are also wonderful examples of texts as they exist in a fluid and dynamic literary universe, a process of production, not bound to one person, one meaning, or one final form and certainly not to a notion of orderly, discrete progress.

In this same spirit, when we discuss matters concerning the nature of authorship and of audience, traditional literary histories have not always been successful in representing the history of authorship and readership as dynamic processes rather than specific events. As scholars of photography have observed, photographs are actually quite bad at giving one a sense of movement through time as opposed to freezing time. If one could imagine an alternative to frozen moments of "historical time," what would the equivalent sense of "literary time" be?

Elsewhere, I have made a case argument for considering a group of literary texts in this way, looking at them in terms of the writer's cohort, or life experience group, rather than by the year of publication.³ While a "thick description" of a year's activities can reveal much about the practices of publication and of the nature of authorship and reading, changing the lens to consider the same text as part of a writer's "family time," can reveal still

³ Cf. "Conclusions" (pp. 161-66) in my *Writing Women's Literary History*, and also "To be Your Daughter in Your Pen," and "Engendering History, I: Women Readers and History Writing in Restoration England," lecture given at the University of Notre Dame, Dec. 4, 1994.

further types of information about what I shall call “generational” reading and writing. Because of our traditional notion of the text in history as a static and event-defined cultural product, we have obscured the extent to which other life experiences – the writer’s cohort or generational life experiences, to name only the most obvious – shape the creation, dissemination, and relative reception of literary texts.

The multiplicity of approaches I am obviously advocating pushes us towards a rethinking of our notion of literary order and progress. I do not have the space to engage in a discussion of chaos theory’s challenges to our notions of finite and predictable experiences, but I shall note here historians’ embrace of it as a potential method for investigating historical change.⁴ Literary history has yet to take advantage of this multitude of new ways to consider old problems of time and change over time; we remain mired instead in what Julia Kristeva calls “cursive time,” time which is measured off in patriarchal objects and triumphs. By employing a multiplicity of such lenses through which to examine a text – a practice which parallels the multiple approaches which characterize family history – while one necessarily accepts the existence of critical conflict between the methodologies, one can perhaps guard against the tendency to universalize or to homogenize past experience based on a single date.

In short, the methodologies of family history interest me because they permit a theoretical self-consciousness and an awareness of the epistemological limits of what can be done; as Laslett notes, there are some things that we simply never will know. This condition, however, does not result, in my opinion, in either a paralyzing anxiety brought on by some self-confounded new historicisms or in Perkins’s rather diffuse attempt to exclude material historical concerns entirely. Is literary history possible? Without question, without doubt, and without hesitation – yes. It merely awaits our exploration of its multiple possibilities, to reconsider our attachment to treating both texts and authors like children in model families and turn instead to the investigative methods generated by disciplines such as family history.

⁴ See Alex Argyros, “Narrative and Chaos,” *New Literary History* 23:3 (1992): 659-73; Patrick L. Baker, “Chaos, Order, and Sociological Theory,” *Sociological Inquiry* 63 (1993): 123-49; George Reisch, “Chaos, History, and Narrative,” *History and Theory* 30:1 (1991): 1-20.

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