Introduction

When Theresa, the bookish heroine of Elizabeth Sophia Tomlins's *The Victim of Fancy* (1786), visits Milton's grave, she is flooded by indescribable feelings and extravagant sensations awakened by an imagined connection with one of the period's most revered authors. "I have kissed the neglected receptacle of the bones of Milton," she announces breathlessly, before going on to confess,

> I have wetted his grave with the enthusiastic tears of admiration. I have before beheld his bust with pleasure, even where so many imaginary heroes and poets have found place; but the spot which really conceals his last venerable remains, seemed for a moment to infuse his spirit into my breast: I felt superior to the beings which surrounded me, and could almost have fancied that I heard those harps for ever strung, with which he has represented the angels of heaven. I looked on the stone, and my heart felt emotions which I am not able to describe.[1]

While Theresa's fantasy of being inspirited by Milton—complete with harp music—suggests how her intensely felt literary responsiveness reaches a fever pitch at Milton's tomb, her enthusiasm for a literary canon still in the mak-

ing is palpable on nearly every page of Tomlins's novel. Theresa, after all, quotes Shakespeare and succumbs to "Werteromania" (*VF* 97). She waxes rhapsodic on the subject of literary genius, admitting, "I hear the voice of genius, my heart vibrates to its sound" (*VF* 9).

Yet if Tomlins's heroine has learned to revere a poet as canonical as Milton, she is puzzled at how to respond when, across the crowded Pump Room at Bath, she spies Sophia Lee, recently catapulted to fame by the success of her sentimental novel *The Recess* (1783–5). Theresa is initially put off by the attention Lee attracts: "And this then, thought I, is the *Temeraire*, whose name has been publicly joined with that of one of the first female writers of our age!" (*VF* 36). Her response reflects the ambivalence typical of contemporary assessments of sentimental fiction, for at this point Theresa has not yet read Lee's novel. Framing Lee as "the *Temeraire*" or the audacious one, Theresa views Lee as a literary newcomer who has dared to challenge Frances Burney's position as the leading female novelist of the age. Doubting whether anyone "should be ranked with the writer of Cecilia" (*VF* 36), she takes for granted Burney's exceptionalism among a crowd of seemingly inferior women novelists. It is only after reading *The Recess*—which leaves her so overcome with feeling she spends three days in bed recovering from it—that she finds Lee deserves her literary fame. Confessing that once she began *The Recess* she could not put it down, Theresa describes its language as having "all the fire and all the softness of poetry" (*VF* 56), elevating Lee's work by associating it with a more venerated genre.

Theresa's dilemma—the problem of what to make of a popular novelist like Sophia Lee—illuminates the uncertain position of sentimental novels and the women who wrote them at the end of the eighteenth century. In setting Theresa's ardent love of Milton against her initial ambivalence toward Lee, Tomlins reflects on what changes in the cultural status of literature would mean for women novelists. While at mid-century Samuel Johnson could define literature as "learning" or "skill in letters," as the years wore on, it came to denote a narrower range of imaginative writing before finally becoming identifiable with a still more select canon. As literature was set apart as a body of inspired, original, and culturally valued works, shifts took place that redefined notions of authorship, established criteria for evaluating literary works, and consolidated legal protections for authors. Sentimental novels like *The Victim of Fancy* mediated these changes—which had far-reaching implications for women novelists—in their pages. In the final decades of the eighteenth century, women novelists like Tomlins turned the

sentimental novel to new purposes, recording and metacritically reflecting on the transformations then reshaping literature.

This book is about those transformations. It argues that sentimental novels of the 1780s and 1790s reflect on and provide ways of thinking about the conditions of cultural and literary survival; the selection, retrieval, and assessment of past works; the establishment of fundamental principles of critical judgment; the evaluations and exclusions of a national literary canon; the development of professional modes of authorship; and the valorization of genius and originality. Read this way, the excesses of late-century sentimental novels—long decried for their riotously improbable plots and over-the-top feeling—register the strain produced by the disciplinary reorganization of literature at the end of the eighteenth century.

Drawing together areas of inquiry that have not often been brought to bear on one another, I put the history of the novel and women's literary history in conversation with book history to better read the situation of later eighteenth-century women novelists. Despite the undisputed significance of this era for book historians—we now recognize the later eighteenth century as the period in which literature in its modern sense came into being as well as one in which reading practices shifted, literary values changed, and authorship became increasingly professionalized—its popular fiction has slipped out of our histories of these developments. In part, this may be due to our own sense, borrowed from this period, that popular sentimental novels have little to do with the more august realms of literature. Certainly this view was commonplace in the later eighteenth century. However innovative it had seemed in the hands of Samuel Richardson, Laurence Sterne, and even Henry Mackenzie, by the 1780s, sentimental fiction no longer enjoyed its earlier cachet and had, by the 1790s, become something of a national literary embarrassment. Though it had played a crucially important role in the history of the early novel, and though it was still the most fashionable novelistic mode in the later eighteenth century, sentimental fiction lost ground as literature was elevated and as sentimental writing became, like the novel more generally in the 1780s, the purview of women.[2] I argue that novels by Sophia Lee, Ann Radcliffe, Charlotte Smith, and Mary Robinson memorialize the literary-historical conditions of their writing. Their works record a moment in literary history in which sentimental fiction was never more popular and never less admired, a moment in which women writers successfully navigated the professional marketplace but struggled to position their works among more lasting literary monuments. And as later

sentimental novels archive women's different relations to literary history, they also make art out of those relations. Their documentary and aesthetic responses provide us with ways of rethinking the signal literary developments of the later eighteenth century even as they transfigure them into something new. By reading later sentimental novels within the history of the transformations reshaping literature, we may not only shed new light on late-century fiction, but also on the history of literature itself.

To some extent the decline of the sentimental novel coincided with the cultural devaluation of sensibility at the end of the eighteenth century.[3] Three years after Hannah More raised the worrying possibility in *Sensibility: A Poetic Epistle* (1782) that the "tender tones" and "fond tears" of sensibility could be feigned,[4] Mackenzie confessed his disillusionment with sentimental fiction in an essay for the *Lounger* that held sentimental fiction largely responsible for what he saw as the literary undervaluation of the novel. There he took umbrage at "that species called the *Sentimental*" for inculcating false morals and thereby damaging the novel's standing.[5] But the cultural decline of sensibility tells only part of the story. The fall of sentimental fiction also occurred as it became the purview of women, for while writers like Sarah Fielding and Elizabeth Griffith had worked concurrently with Sterne and Mackenzie to shape the genre at mid-century, by the 1780s sentimental fiction had become the province of women. Though reviewers mentioned this shift as early as 1773, when the *Monthly Review* announced, "This branch of the literary *trade* appears, now, to be almost entirely engrossed by the Ladies," bibliographic research has shown that it was not complete until the late 1780s, when a slight but growing majority of novels were written by women, a situation that held until the 1820s.[6] And as the novel, like sentimental literature, was taken up by women, its decline was so precipitous that by the early 1790s female authors who wished to be taken seriously began to distance themselves from its excesses. In their different ways, Clara Reeve and Mary Wollstonecraft disavowed sentimentality even as they set about reforming its conventions in their own works. As Reeve noted in her 1791 preface to *The School for Widows*, the "rage for SENTIMENT" has created a demand for "whining, maudlin stories, full of false sentiment and false delicacy, calculated to excite a kind of morbid sensibility."[7] Admitting that her own fiction "is written more to the heart than the head," she nevertheless aims at realigning sensibility and virtue and, implicitly, at redeeming sentimental fiction.[8] And while Wollstonecraft dismissed what she characterized as "flimsy works" and "stale tales . . . all retailed in a sentimental

jargon," her own novels sought in their different ways to rewrite the conventions she railed against.[9]

This sense of the degradation of sentimental fiction owed as well to the novel's burgeoning numbers. "Novel reading is now the only taste of the day," the *Trifler* observed in 1796, and in recent years bibliographic research has documented a surge in novel production in the last decades of the eighteenth century.[10] Though obsolescence had long stalked the early novel, on or about 1785 its fortunes changed. Publication rates took off, and between 1785 and 1799, 990 new titles appeared, more than twice the number published in the previous fifteen years.[11] During the same period, women published more novels than men, in part because of the remarkable productivity of some individual authors like Charlotte Smith.[12] Even as the number of new novels spiked, most readers found novels prohibitively expensive to purchase and opted to read them through circulating libraries.[13] The close association between novels and circulating libraries through this period damaged the reputation of the latter, which were viewed with concern by those who saw them as dispensaries of cheap fiction to an addicted public. Apparently destined to be quickly read and tossed aside, novels, for all their bulk, came to seem faddish and evanescent, short-lived works that were all too easily dismissed as, in Anna Letitia Barbauld's words, "ephemeral publications which . . . live their day, and are then buried in oblivion."[14] (Barbauld herself, of course, thought more highly of the novel, and her fifty-volume collection *The British Novelists*, first published in 1810, played a key role in shaping an emerging novelistic canon in the early nineteenth century, in part by protesting critical assumptions that the genre had "a better chance of giving pleasure than of commanding respect."[15]) For many eighteenth-century commentators, however, the sheer number of new novels—most of which were unabashedly sentimental, gothic, or some amalgamation of the two—seemed to have depleted the genre's possibilities. As early as 1752, the *Monthly Review* complained, "All the variety of which this species of literary entertainment is capable, seems almost exhausted, and even novels themselves no longer charm us with novelty."[16] Similar complaints were made by reviewers for decades to come.[17] According to one commentator, novels were less original compositions than mechanically produced goods: "When a manufacture has been carried on long enough for the workmen to attain a general proficiency, the uniformity of the stuffs will render it difficult to decide on the preference of one piece beyond another." This critic went on to compare present "workmen" against the skilled artisans of earlier decades:

"Richardson, Fielding, Smollet [*sic*], and Sterne, were the Wedgwoods of their days; and the imitators that have since started up in the same line, exceed all power of calculation!"[18] Late-century novels, in this assessment, have been cranked out by hacks whose works pale in comparison to more original achievements of prior decades.

The surge of new novels was accompanied by a sharp increase in the number of titles published each year. In 1791, the bookseller James Lackington argued that "more than four times the number of books are sold now than were sold twenty years since," and there is some evidence to corroborate his claim.[19] The uptick in book production was furthered by *Donaldson v. Becket*, a 1774 decision by the House of Lords that put an end to the practice of perpetual copyright.[20] The decision, hailed by Trevor Ross as the moment when "literature in its modern sense began," contributed to the formation of a British national canon by increasing the production of uniformly printed and modestly priced multi-volume series of classic (and mostly out-of-copyright) works.[21] For Michael Gamer, the years after the 1774 decision "constitute, if not an Age of Canonization, a span of years in which venture publicists . . . became canon-builders by reprinting British authors on an unprecedented scale."[22] As such collections proliferated, they helped to install a recognizable, though not entirely monolithic, canon in the minds and shelves of British readers. While this canon was not fixed, and the writers included varied somewhat from collection to collection, it centered on the works of male poets and playwrights.[23]

The effect of the 1774 decision was twofold on the novelists I study here. Not only were professional writers working during the last quarter of the eighteenth century acutely aware that their works competed with older texts that were marketed as having lasting literary value, but they also had cause to worry that curtailing the copyright period would lower the prices they could command for their works. In *A Modest Plea for the Property of Copy Right* (1774), Catharine Macaulay noted that if booksellers could not obtain a perpetual copyright in the works they purchased, they might lose their incentive to publish important or controversial works whose value might be fully realized only over many years. Consequently, she feared, authors would be unable to command fair prices for works that were not readily marketable, while hacks who churned out "trifling amusements" would flourish.[24] Though her dire prediction that *Donaldson v. Becket* would "not only be disadvantageous, but ruinous to the state of literature" was not vindicated by history,[25] her concern that authors' compensation would be determined

by the fashionability or topicality of their wares was shared by others. In a pointed send-up of the literary marketplace in Mary Robinson's 1799 novel *The Natural Daughter*, a bookseller tells an aspiring author that,

> if your fertile pen can make a story out of some recent popular event, such as an highly-fashioned elopement, a deserted, distracted husband, an abandoned wife, an ungrateful runaway daughter, or a son ruined by sharpers . . . or any thing from real life of equal celebrity or notoriety, your fortune is made; your works will sell, and you will either be admired or feared by the whole phalanx of fashionable readers.[26]

In the final decades of the eighteenth century, professional novelists had a newly sharpened sense that their livelihoods depended on writing readily marketable or topical works, as a flood of novels that advertised their modernity in titles like *A Tale of the Times*, *Things as They Are*, or *The World as it Goes* would seem to evidence.[27]

Later sentimental novels thus chart what it means to write in an era in which, in Andrew Piper's words, "there are suddenly a great deal more books to read, when indeed there are *too many* books to read."[28] The outpouring of new novels and uniform collections of revered works shaped the professional choices made by late-century novelists no less than the narrative and formal strategies of their works. Professional writers striving for respectability or lasting literary reputations aligned their works more with the ranks of literature than the dreck of the circulating library, as the letters of Charlotte Smith indicate. Take, for example, a letter comically narrating an encounter with William Lane, who soon would soon be renowned as the brash founding proprietor of the Minerva Press. Lane's establishment, which produced approximately one-third of the novels printed in London in the 1790s, was a notorious novel manufactory that churned out sensational, cheaply printed works.[29] In her letter, Smith describes Lane as "a vulgar fat Man" who has called on her to solicit her second novel, *Ethelinde* (1789), assuring her that whatever sum she has been promised by Thomas Cadell, the highly respected publisher of her previous works, he will double it. Smith mocks Lane's effrontery, and while she goes on to bemoan the poverty that has made her prey to such "pert advances," her letter displays the care she took with her professional reputation.[30] For Smith, who began her career as the genteel author of *Elegiac Sonnets*, a well-received collection of poems, novels represented a means of supporting her large family. Yet dire as her financial hardship was, it did not mitigate her need to bolster her literary reputation,

especially in the early years of her career, by working with Cadell, a publisher whose exclusivity was visible in the select list of novelists he worked with, a list that in the 1780s included Frances Burney and Sophia Lee.

A similar self-consciousness is evident in the period's fiction. Designed to appeal to the broad market demand for certain (sentimental and gothic) modes of fiction, and intensely aware of the elevation of a national literary canon that for the most part excluded the novel, late-century novels straddle fissures that had begun to open up between popular and culturally privileged modes of writing.[31] While these changes were not complete until the nineteenth century, the cultural devaluation of the sentimental novel left women novelists stranded. For professional novelists who needed to support themselves, the marketability of sentimental fiction held an unmistakable allure, but for those who sought literary recognition, its ephemerality exacted a cost. Stuck with a genre that was often disparaged as circulating-library trash, late-century women novelists made art out of what seemed only to ensure their literary dispossession.

My approach to these long-maligned novels builds on and diverges from other studies of the novel in the later eighteenth century. This is a body of fiction that, as Claudia L. Johnson and others have observed, was long dismissed by Ian Watt and others for its "sentimentalism" and "gothic terror," regrettable propensities that made it a somewhat embarrassing detour on the high road to formal realism.[32] In his important history of sentimental fiction, R. F. Brissenden followed Watt's lead, writing dismissively, "It is after the publication of *A Sentimental Journey* in 1768 that the mildew begins to spread across the surface of the novel."[33] More recently, late-century novels have been recuperated by critics like Marilyn Butler, Gary Kelly, and Johnson, who have positioned them within the turbulent years following the French Revolution and found in their pages important political interventions.[34] Other scholars, including John Mullan, G. J. Barker-Benfield, Ann Jessie Van Sant, Markman Ellis, and Lynn Festa, have turned to sentimental literature to illuminate the cultural history of sensibility and its links to Britain's growing consumer society, expanding empire, and abolitionist movement.[35] Certainly I am much indebted to critics who have explored the political, economic, and social dimensions of sentimental novels. But, reading sentimental fiction differently, I aim to show how these novels meaningfully respond to changes in the cultural status of literature, authorship, and sentimentality at the end of the eighteenth century, changes that stranded sentimental genres and left their mostly female practitioners on

the margins of literary history. The result of these changes, so transparent to us in hindsight, was what Clifford Siskin has termed the Great Forgetting, the gradual elision of sentimental fiction—and consequently of many women writers—from emerging notions of literary canonicity.[36] Within our critical histories of the Great Forgetting, the women who were to be forgotten seem all but unaware of the changes that were relegating sentimentalism to the margins of literary history. In part, this has been because the Great Forgetting has seemed to be a nineteenth-century development, part of the reorganization of knowledge that took place with the rise of literature as a discipline and, more precisely, with the establishment of what F. R. Leavis would call the Great Tradition.[37]

But if this "disciplinary disappearance" of women was a later phenomenon, it was also an evocative repetition, and further institutionalization, of changes apparent at the close of the eighteenth century.[38] In 1785, protesting what she saw as the marginalization of women writers and, especially, women novelists, Frances Brooke claimed that recent developments had conspired "to exclude [women] from the road of literary fame," despite the special talent for fiction writing that she claimed for her sex based on their "quick sensibility, native delicacy of mind, [and] facility of expression."[39] While women writers enjoyed previously unmatched professional opportunities in 1785, Brooke's comment indicates that such opportunities were given at the expense of literary distinction. Though women were publishing at greater rates than ever before, and though many took advantage of the professional opportunities afforded them by the literary marketplace, publishing novels as well as poems, plays, essays, memoirs, travel writing, magazine fiction, histories, conduct manuals, children's literature, and translations, their works did not receive the marks of public recognition reserved for other, more culturally valued forms of writing. After all, the great literary history of the age, Thomas Warton's *History of English Poetry* (1774–81), made little mention of women's literary achievements. Neither were women writers taken more seriously in a number of influential critical discussions of prose fiction, for Vicesimus Knox, Hugh Blair, James Beattie, and John Moore managed in their different works to disregard novels by their female compatriots.[40] Nor were women's works included in the multivolume collections of English poetry and drama that offered Britons their national literary tradition packaged in aesthetically pleasing—and gratifyingly substantial—volumes.[41] And neither were monuments to women writers included in what had become, by the later eighteenth century, the

most prominent exhibition of British literary achievement, Poets' Corner in Westminster Abbey, for while Aphra Behn and Margaret Cavendish were buried elsewhere in the abbey, other women writers would wait until the twentieth century to be memorialized there.[42]

Such exclusions did not go entirely unchallenged in the last quarter of the eighteenth century. Though fiction was left out of many eighteenth-century acts of canon formation, Elizabeth Griffith's three-volume work entitled *A Collection of Novels* (1777) featured seven pieces of French and English fiction, six of which were by women (including two titles by Behn and one each by Eliza Haywood and Penelope Aubin). Griffith wrote candidly about her decision to expurgate what she saw as these novels' more objectionable passages and indicated that such editorial emendations were necessary to make these increasingly disreputable works worthy of "the most select libraries" where their presence might "rescue the Authors of this species of writing, as well as their works, both from reproof and contempt."[43] Shortly thereafter, the *Novelist's Magazine*, serialized throughout the 1780s by James Harrison, made a number of novels (including several works by women) cheaply available to readers.[44] Among the novels Harrison reprinted were two works each by Frances Sheridan, Sarah Fielding, and Charlotte Lennox and three by Haywood. Unlike the imposing collections of poetry and drama that sought to embody a British literary canon, however, the *Novelist's Magazine*, at least in its early years, did not present its contents as having any particular national significance, and Harrison's title and the appearance of his work aligned the series more with the periodical than with the multivolume collection of British classics.[45] Harrison embarked on a similar project in the *New Novelist's Magazine* (1786–87), a periodical he devoted to anthologizing shorter works of prose fiction; in its pages, he included favorite pieces by women writers like Haywood, Lennox, and Barbauld.[46]

Nor was Harrison alone in his more inclusive approach to the novel. In *Sketches of a History of Literature* (1794), Robert Alves turned briefly to the novel, and while he reserved his highest praise for a select group of male novelists, he also acknowledged the works of three women—Elizabeth Griffith, Sophia Lee, and Frances Burney—as belonging "among the best" British novels.[47] Elsewhere, the 1788 *Catalogue of Five Hundred Celebrated Authors of Great Britain, Now Living* did not omit the achievements of British women writers and included among its distinguished ranks thirty-two women, though their numbers made up only 6 percent of the individuals given entries in the work.[48] Arguably the most significant challenge, how-

ever, came in 1785, the same year that Brooke protested the literary marginalization of female novelists. Pushing back against the elision of romance and novel from the emerging field of literary criticism, Clara Reeve sought in *The Progress of Romance* to elevate the critical reputations of both genres. Her discussion, which evaluated works by male and female authors alike, offered a corrective to earlier discussions of prose fiction that excluded any mention of British women writers. *The Progress of Romance* takes seriously women's literary contributions, and while Reeve famously dismisses works of amorous intrigue by the "notorious trio" of Behn, Delarivier Manley, and Haywood, her study reveals, as Betty A. Schellenberg notes, "an overriding concern with deploying acts of naming and obliteration to construct an accurate and value-based, rather than purely arbitrary, literary history."[49] Paying tribute to some works and writers as she suggests others are best forgotten, Reeve treats women's fiction as worthy of critical judgment.

Despite such efforts, by the end of the century Mary Robinson inveighed against the comparative lack of public recognition for women's literary achievements. In *A Letter to the Women of England* (1799), she rages,

> There is no country, at this epocha, on the habitable globe, which can produce so many exalted and illustrious women (I mean mentally) as England. And yet we see many of them living in obscurity; known only by their writings; neither at the tables of women of rank; nor in the studies of men of genius; we hear of no national honours, no public marks of popular applause, no rank, no title, no liberal and splendid recompense bestowed on British literary women![50]

No doubt Robinson's impassioned tone owes something to the vitriol lobbed at her and other politically radical women writers as the 1790s wore on, but her critique also attests to the particular historical situation of her generation. Robinson was witness to the diminution of her predecessors' reputations, and her rancorous catalog of women's literary dispossession—"no national honours, no public marks of popular applause, no rank, no title, no liberal and splendid recompense"—owes some of its bite to the fact that, at mid-century, women writers had been feted publicly. As late as the 1770s, the *Westminster Magazine* had called for intellectual women to be granted honorary degrees at Oxford. In 1779, the artist Richard Samuel exhibited a painting titled *The Nine Living Muses of Great Britain* that celebrated a rather disparate group of bluestockings, artists, and women of letters: Elizabeth Carter, Angelica Kauffmann, Anna Letitia Barbauld, Elizabeth Linley,

Catharine Macaulay, Elizabeth Montagu, Elizabeth Griffith, Hannah More, and Charlotte Lennox.[51] Two of these muses were feted in other ways as well, albeit sometimes with mock adulation. Samuel Johnson himself had led the festivities celebrating the publication of Lennox's first novel, *The Life of Harriot Stuart, Written by Herself* (1750):

> The place appointed was the Devil tavern, and there, about the hour of eight, Mrs. Lenox and her husband, and a lady of her acquantance [*sic*], now living, as also the club, and friends to the number of twenty, assembled. Our supper was elegant, and Johnson had directed that a magnificent hot apple-pye should make a part of it, and this he would have stuck with bay-leaves, because, forsooth, Mrs. Lenox was an authoress, and had written verses; and further, he had prepared for her a crown of laurel, with which, but not till he had invoked the muses by some ceremonies of his own invention, he encircled her brows.[52]

Yet by 1790, reviews of Lennox's final novel, *Euphemia*, were dismissive; Mary Wollstonecraft wrote mournfully that it was no better than "the general run of novels."[53] And though she lived in abject poverty for fourteen years more, Lennox never published again. The decline of one of Lennox's contemporaries was perhaps even more crushing. Feted even more spectacularly than Lennox, Catharine Macaulay presided over a birthday party from a perch on a throne and had a statue erected in her honor in the 1770s. And though the *European Magazine* observed that she "experienced more of the extremes of adulation and obloquy than any one of her own sex in the literary world," she received mostly the latter by the end of her career.[54] Late in life, after a series of negative appraisals, she complained about "the sad condition of my Historical laurels," a phrase that captures the poignancy of her situation, for by the end of her life, the laurels she had won as a historian had become tarnished relics of a prior age.[55] After Macaulay's death, Wollstonecraft hailed her as "the woman of the greatest abilities, undoubtedly, that this country has ever produced" and reported mournfully that she "has been suffered to die without sufficient respect being paid to her memory."[56] As if to stave off a similar fate for herself and her contemporaries, Robinson appended to *A Letter to the Women of England* a "List of British Female Literary Characters" that included the names of notable women writers, translators, and artists.[57] Robinson's recuperative project, aimed at preserving the reputations of "British literary women," rejects the distinctions that had begun to be made between women's writing and the emerging canon of British literature: works by women belong, she insists, to the realm of literature.

If the literary-historical self-consciousness of *The Progress of Romance* and *A Letter to the Women of England* clarifies how women writers understood their changing relations to literary history at the end of the eighteenth century, it also cues us to recognize some of the ways this self-consciousness gave meaningful shape to their fiction. My approach acknowledges the ways in which women writers were aware of the winnowing of literature to exclude sentimental fiction and, moreover, shows how their novels reflect on what these transformations would mean for their own works, authorial identities, and legacies. I thus credit late-century sentimental novels—and their writers—with a self-consciousness that has sometimes been denied them. Their various forms of reflexivity are evident in the found manuscripts and scenes of reading, epigraphs and inset lyrics, quotations and literary borrowings that crop up throughout their pages. In the chapters that follow, I argue that the rich intertextuality of late-century sentimental fiction provides ways of understanding how women writers responded to developments like the emergence of a national literary canon, the consolidation of legal protections for authors, and the arrival of notions of authorship privileging originality and genius. As a self-historicizing genre, sentimental fiction provided a crucial space where the material conditions of writing and gender could be worked through at a time when literature and sentimentality had come under tremendous pressure. Its significance lies in the extent to which it addresses—in self-consciously literary ways—questions posed by the restructuring of literature.

By reading sentimental novels as memorializing, quite self-consciously, the conditions of their writing, my approach differs from other historicist accounts of later eighteenth-century fiction. I am particularly indebted to new historicist insights into the relations among texts, cultural discourses, and social institutions, but I combine these concerns with a new emphasis on the self-reflexive and formally innovative aspects of sentimental novels. My approach thus allows us to see these works less as passive registers of cultural meaning than as carefully crafted works that inscribe into formal structure alternative versions of literary history. In reading sentimental novels as memorials, I draw on Pierre Nora's account of *lieux de mémoire*, sites that embody memory but also mark what he calls "the sense that memory has been torn."[58] As novel memorials, works of sentimental fiction testify to a split in the second half of the eighteenth century between the awareness and still vibrant memory of women's literary accomplishments and the emergence of new and culturally ascendant strands of literary

history that reconstruct the literary past in part by leaving out women's contributions. What is more, these works offer up critically important interventions for our own revisionist histories, in part because their mode of literary remembrance is less monumental than sentimental. While we sometimes use words like "monument" and "memorial" interchangeably, the chapters that follow differentiate between eighteenth-century literary monuments—a category that might include such imposing material objects as the busts and stone slabs of Poets' Corner and the 109 volumes of John Bell's *Poets of Great Britain* (1776–82)—and novel memorials.[59] Both, of course, enlist their readers in acts of remembrance. But where the cool, austere atmosphere of the literary monument inspires veneration and stands witness to the timeless achievements of great writers, novel memorials are altogether less imposing, serving as they (at least at some level) did as affecting diversions meant for quick consumption by circulating-library readers. Moreover, while the monument may, through its Latin root *monere*, take on a monitory function, prodding its viewer to remember that which should not be forgotten, the memorial, in line with its etymological transmission through the Late Latin *memoriale*, seeks instead to preserve the memory of what has been lost. That is, while the literary monument charges its viewer not to forget, the sentimental memorial stands for a mode of commemoration that admits the inevitability of forgetting and that seeks to preserve not what has been lost, but rather its remembered image. Read as attempts to preserve memories of achievements that were already slipping away, sentimental novels acknowledge and resist their own transience. Further, despite contemporary suppositions about the ephemerality of sentimental fiction, these novels provide us, their latter-day readers, with a rich archive in which we can discover how women novelists responded to and resisted literary transformations that imperiled their reputations and legacies. By providing alternative means of understanding and explicating the position of women writers, these novels suggest how we might take forward the still-unfinished work of women's literary history.

I begin with the novel that so moved Theresa in *The Victim of Fancy*. *The Recess; or, A Tale of Other Times* at once traces an emerging historical consciousness in sentimental fiction and raises serious questions about the limits of historical knowledge. Such questions were prompted by the sentimental historiography of David Hume and William Robertson as well as by James Macpherson's claims to have recovered fragments of a long-lost bardic tradition from the Highlands of Scotland. However different, sentimental

history and the recovered poems of Ossian shared the aim of recuperating the past by adapting aspects of fiction to retrieve what has been lost to history. Yet if sentimental history and Ossianic verse attempt to revive the past for sympathetic readers, Lee suggests that such recuperative projects have instead cut off access to the past.

In both *The Recess*, which I consider in Chapter 1, and Ann Radcliffe's *The Romance of the Forest* (1791), the focus of Chapter 2, the *manuscrit trouvé* offers up a way of thinking about the technology of writing as a means of archiving the past. In the "Advertisement" to *The Recess*, Lee claims her story is extracted from a found manuscript relating the experiences of long-lost daughters of Mary Queen of Scots. Rather than transcribing the manuscript, Lee translates it into more contemporary language and thus accounts for the sentimental idiom of *The Recess* as a substitution necessitated by the manuscript's obsolescence. No longer able to communicate its original meaning, the manuscript exists in the novel as a defunct material form, an obsolete written technology reclaimed by print's substitution of sentimental fiction for handwritten record. While the expansion and institutionalization of print in the eighteenth century did not supersede manuscripts so much as open them to a new range of meanings, in Lee's redaction of the transition from a manuscript-based literary culture to late-century print culture, the manuscript has been utterly supplanted by the printed book. As a result, the past archived by manuscripts has been lost and can be reclaimed only by substituting printed fictions for irretrievable experiences. Reading the manuscript in this way allows us to see how Lee's novel offers a corrective to sentimental history, countering its practice of substituting fiction for history by establishing a historical perspective that takes the past as past.

Where *The Recess* memorializes a past that is irrecoverably lost, *The Romance of the Forest* goes further, using highly wrought scenes of reading to suggest that just as written technologies like manuscripts cannot preserve past experience, neither can the most sympathetic reading recover it. Before I proceed, my inclusion of Radcliffe's fiction in a study of sentimental novels may merit a quick explanation. By including the doyenne of the gothic novel among more obviously sentimental writers like Lee, Smith, and Robinson, I call attention to aspects of Radcliffe's fiction that have sometimes been left out of studies emphasizing its more gothic qualities (aspects that, as Terry Castle has noted, actually give her novels much of their bulk).[60] Radcliffe's novelistic aesthetic centers on found manuscripts

and inset lyrics, technologies for storing the literary production of written and oral cultures that allow her to confront the limitations of material forms as archives of experience. In an era intensely aware of the historicity of language and of the ways in which writing was subject to decay, and in which only some authors were retrieved from dereliction and neglect, Radcliffe anticipates within the structure of her fiction the fading of her own novelistic form and her disappearance from a literary canon mostly reserved for male poets. In the end, her novels allow us to better read the situation of women novelists in the 1790s, for despite her unsurpassed popular, critical, and financial success, even Ann Radcliffe found herself generating a literary form outside the protections given to authors brought into the canon.

These same concerns with the historicity of writing ran back into the ways professional women novelists like Charlotte Smith and Mary Robinson imagined themselves historically into authorship. Best known for their poetry, upon which their literary reputations continue to rest, Smith and Robinson turned to sentimental fiction as a means of supporting their families. As married women, however, their literary property was in a very real sense not their own. Smith and Robinson, in their different ways, embed their biographies into their novels to inscribe their ownership over their works and to mark them as unmistakably theirs.

Repeatedly inscribing her biography into the form of her novels, Smith, to whom I turn in Chapter 3, understands the difficulties of her own life as structured by historical circumstances so extreme that they can be told only through sentimental fiction. Alienated from established coteries and literary circles and doubly dispossessed by copyright and coverture, Smith casts herself as a literary exile whose poverty and dispossession forces her to repeatedly take up the difficult circumstances of her life in her books. And while she indicts the violent fallout of the French Revolution as giving rise to a world of exiles, she also reserves particular criticism for Britain's legal and political establishment, which in her view has made Britons exiles at home. Smith's fiction clarifies how her mimetic representation of exile, rooted in her own experience, understands that experience as one of unoriginality properly represented through copying. Telling her story through others' words suggests how profoundly she feels dispossessed—not even her history is hers to tell—and simultaneously indicates that she understands her novels as bound to copy out literary relations that serve the interests of male, property-owning authority.

Where Smith's aesthetic of copying gives meaningful shape to her literary dispossession and marks her exclusion from emergent conceptions of originality, Robinson calls on her earlier fame as an actress, fashion icon, and courtesan to sell books. In Chapter 4, I argue that Robinson's notoriety as Perdita, the mistress of the Prince of Wales, Charles James Fox, and other powerful men, meant that she could expect her fame to last beyond her lifetime. What she could not ensure, however, was how she would be remembered. As she established herself in the 1790s as a woman of letters, she marketed another image of herself to the public, one that allowed her to capitalize on her fame and, at the same time, to triumph over her damaged reputation. As the "English Sappho," Robinson cultivated an explicitly gendered and commercial mode of genius. But as the 1790s progressed and sentimental literature slipped further into decline, the transience of this particular mode of female genius became apparent. With the writing on the wall, Robinson used the form of the novel to reflect on the ephemerality of sentimental aesthetics and the short-lived nature of women's literary fame. Her novels connect the decline of female genius and the passing of sentimental literature to consider what these twin losses mean for women's literary history.

Like Robinson, I am concerned in this book with women's literary history, with its acts of forgetting and naming, its preoccupation with what has been lost and with the unfinished business of recuperation. I take up these concerns at a moment when women's literary history has begun to seem passé, though perhaps not quite so passé as sentimental fiction appeared in the 1790s. After all, Radcliffe, Smith, Robinson, and even Lee are now well and truly part of our expanded canon. We have exemplary editions of their works at our disposal. Do we still need studies exclusively devoted to women writers? Is it time—or past time—for women to be studied alongside men? Devoney Looser and others have written feelingly about the continued need for such studies, and have insisted, quite rightly, that these are rarely separatist endeavors.[61] Nor is this one. The acts of reading and commemoration I engage in here position women's novels within the apparently more monumental history of the rise of literature, and in doing so relay a sense of what has been missing from the accounts shaping that history: the strange and sometimes unruly novelistic forms that archive women's awareness of, and attempts to subvert, the histories they are being written out of. I take seriously the formal experimentation and historical sensibility of late-century novels, reading these as testify-

ing to the range of ways in which women novelists clarified, protested, and finally memorialized the historical conditions under which they wrote. And as acts of recovery, the chapters that follow do not so much write an elegy for women's literary history as demonstrate, without sentiment, its continued urgency.