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The Invention of English Criticism

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BOOK REVIEW

The Invention of English Criticism, 1650–1760. *Michael Gavin*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. Pp. vii+220.

The motivating paradox of Michael Gavin's *The Invention of English Criticism, 1650–1760* is that the field of literary criticism arose out of attacks on critics. The book scrutinizes the stereotype of the heckler or illiterate reader, which appears in countless works, from Thomas Dekker's *Nevves from Hell* (1606) to John Dryden's "Apology for Heroic Poetry" (1677). Gavin persuasively argues that the work we now do emerged from this antagonism. Such agonistic origins make for an unusual history of a type of writing that Gavin investigates as initially *not* that; in other words, criticism was originally an activity—something people did—rather than a "species of authorship" (4). As such, critics were, decisively, readers more than writers, and the work that they did took place as much in conversation as it did in print. At its inception, then, criticism emerges in Gavin's telling as a field that acquires identity through contradiction and controversy rather than through order or coherence. The formation of literary judgment as a practice rather than a genre proves a compelling way to tell this story, which uncovers a history more haphazard, messy, and spirited than one might expect.

To set up his argument, Gavin distinguishes between critical writing—"the generically heterogeneous mix of texts that engage arguments about poetry, plays and prose fiction"—and criticism, which has a much broader purview as "the socially realized exercise of judgment" (4). By distinguishing criticism from the texts that put it into practice, he is able to cast a wider net in identifying activities that partake in the exercise of judgment. In a dense introduction followed by six concise chapters ranging from

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early dramatic criticism through the career of James Boswell, Gavin locates the practice of criticism in an array of milieus. He thus complicates prevailing narratives of criticism's emergence in coffeehouse culture and early eighteenth-century periodicals. From the theater pit to the bookseller's shop, and from the drawing rooms of London townhouses to those of provincial country houses, Gavin demonstrates that conversations about books, letters about one's reading and talk, and printed reflections on these activities all enact a social sphere of ongoing debate about literary value. The dynamic—indeed, polyphonic—quality of the debate amounts to a more demotic history than the traditional one he seeks to challenge. He rejects that story for the way it treats readers as passive recipients of expert knowledge, propounded in the pages of the *Spectator* and the *Tatler*. Thus he insists, "We must always guard against the assumption that retrospectively canonized critics spoke in isolation. They didn't" (91).

By grounding his work in book history rather than the history of English as a discipline, or of literary theory, Gavin is firmly planted in scholarship on print culture. The undisciplined quality of seventeenth-century literature and criticism alike gives an unpredictable and fascinating quality to his object of study. By tracing what he calls "the textualization of judgment" (1) as it emerges from overlapping conversations, performances, and printed words, Gavin fashions a vibrant and volatile model for defining and historicizing criticism. He also shows that if the history of criticism should not be treated as tantamount to the history of literary studies (or the history of literature as a discipline), then neither should it be conflated with the history of the public sphere. Theories of the public sphere, he argues, narrate the bifurcation of journalism and academia, and fall short because they exclude most writing by women and because they distort "our understanding of the discipline by reifying and enforcing a false sense of its internal coherence and its boundaries vis-à-vis both journalism and the other academic disciplines" (19).

Focusing on play prefaces and dedicatory epistles, the first chapter, "Criticism and the Institutions of Drama, 1645–1675," explores how, though the theaters were shuttered during the Interregnum, a "playhouse culture" endured in the form of a print culture in which plays and dramatic criticism proliferated. Literary authority once held by the court and ancillary adjudicators (many now in exile) ceded to patrons and booksellers, who took on a greater role in the formation of aesthetic value, publishing books of plays and critical essays that performed in writing the work previously done by aristocratic coterie culture. Chapter 2, "Politics of Parnassus," broadens the social space (now including coffeehouses) and the form (pamphlets, poetry collections, session poems in both manuscript and print) wherein criticism is enacted. Through the trope of Parnassus,

Gavin argues that “literary criticism went public in the 1690s . . . by conceptualizing a zone of debate specially devoted to poetic controversy” (53).

Chapters 3 and 4 (“Women among Critics,” “Criticism and the Poetry of Anne Finch”) to my mind feature the book’s most compelling interventions. The former chapter investigates women as both playwrights and spectators, noting how their novel contributions generated robust critical debate: in the 1690s, “criticism developed simultaneously as discourse of gender regulation and as a new technique of sexual play” (75). The next chapter shifts focus from the metropole to the provinces, upending long-standing bias toward London as the source and center of literary activity and innovation. Ensnared in the country homes of various relatives, Anne Finch challenged prevailing norms among the satirists who dominated London’s literary scene. By tracing what she chose to circulate in manuscript versus what she chose to print (albeit anonymously), Gavin argues that Finch waged a critique of masculinist satire, meanwhile forging a feminine provincial network among family and friends, in both conversation and correspondence. Ironically, perhaps, her implicit defense of women’s writing is housed within various “patriarchal estates” (107), thus mitigating—or at least complicating—prevailing feminist interpretations of Finch’s oeuvre.

Gavin’s last two chapters (“Disciplining the Dunces: Literary Knowledge in *The Dunciad Variorum*,” “Boswell and Co.: Conversation and Criticism in the Age of Print”) offer two exemplary models of critics who played decisive roles in the formation of the institution we now call criticism. Pope uses his *Variorum* to discredit others who believe that even the misjudgments of bad critics contribute to the overall store of critical knowledge. Boswell, rather than presuming to adjudicate what critics should do, exemplifies how newcomers to London’s literary scene could manipulate its appetite for critical controversy to their advantage. Both chapters, in their own way, advance Gavin’s claim that critical knowledge emerges out of controversy rather than issuing from revered experts who determine literary value for the rest of us.

One question that lingers unanswered relates to the significance of social status in Gavin’s history of criticism. His first chapter painstakingly charts how the Restoration court reestablished a tight grip on theater culture; yet, he doesn’t address how the increased involvement of nonaristocrats like bookseller Henry Herringman affected the social landscape of print culture. Looking skeptically upon scholarship that treats criticism as a locus for the formation of middle-class identity, his account does not fully convince me that the rise of the middle class is a tangential rather than crucial thread of the story. By contrast, his inclusion of women writ-

ers proves a profoundly insightful contribution to scholarship that others might extend by studying Gavin's work alongside, for example, Manushag Powell's *Performing Authorship in Eighteenth-Century English Periodicals* (2014).

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