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EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY WOMEN'S WRITING AND THE 'SCANDALOUS MEMOIR'

Caroline Breashears

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This book is about influence and innovation, so I begin with the origin of my interest in women's memoirs: the inspiring classes and writings of Patricia Meyer Spacks, who drew attention to the life writings of women in her groundbreaking study, *Imagining a Self: Autobiography and Novel in Eighteenth-Century England*. Decades later, she remains my model of a scholar, teacher, and mentor. I continue to be fortunate in the support of friends and colleagues, and those in the English Department at St. Lawrence University—especially Peter Bailey and Bruce Weiner—have been unfailingly generous.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Innovations in the "Scandalous Memoir"

Abstract This project contributes to the literary history of eighteenth-century women's life writings, particularly those labeled "scandalous memoirs." I argue that the evolution of this subgenre was shaped partially by several memoirs that have received only modest critical attention: Madame de La Touche's *Apologie* (1736), Lady Vane's *Memoirs of a Lady of Quality* (1751), Catherine Jemmat's *Memoirs* (1762), and Margaret Coghlan's *Memoirs* (1794). To illuminate their contributions, I review our current understanding of the origins and significance of the "scandalous memoir" as well as questions recently raised about women's collaboration and the fluidity of forms. I add to this discussion with new information about these memoirists, whom I situate within historical and generic contexts. In so doing, I reveal their innovations in form and meaning.

Keywords Life writings · "Scandalous memoirs" · Genre · Innovation · Lady Vane · Madame La Touche · Tobias Smollett · Catherine Jemmat · Margaret Coghlan

In *Memoirs of Mrs. Coghlan (Daughter of the Late Major Moncrieffe)* (1794), the courtesan Margaret Coghlan describes meeting her mother's two sisters, who shed tears over the "mournful tale" of her life. "They

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accused my Husband as the Author[,] of all my Sorrows," she notes, "and were kind enough to observe, that a Woman possessing such sensibility never could, *from choice*, pursue the paths of Vice."[1] The path of vice is only one of many routes that Coghlan traces in her *Memoirs*. She depicts her spatial journeys across America, Britain, France, and the Atlantic Ocean; her social passage from respectability to disrepute; her intellectual journey as she comes to embrace the patriotism of America and France; and her financial spiral into debt and imprisonment.

The path of life—spatial, moral, social, financial—is a recurring theme in Coghlan's text and eighteenth-century "scandalous memoirs" generally. Each memoirist traces her route in order to justify her choices and appeal for readers' understanding. At the same time, each memoirist's trail differs, creating variations in the subgenre that lead to its evolution. This book examines the paths of several innovative memoirs, tracing where they precede, intersect with, and branch from the life writings already identified as significant. It therefore adds to our generic map of the "scandalous memoir" which has emerged over the last few decades due to the work of scholars such as Felicity Nussbaum, Lynda M. Thompson, and Amy Culley.[2]

My focus is a cluster of memoirs that have received modest critical attention: the life writings of Madame de La Touche, Lady Vane, Catherine Jemmat, and Margaret Coghlan. Their memoirs show how the subgenre evolved partially in response to larger historical changes, including the rise of the bourgeoisie, shifting kinship priorities, and a period of political revolution. I argue that the memoirs of Madame de La Touche and especially Lady Vane contributed to the crystallization of this subgenre at mid-century (in the middle of the eighteenth century); that Lady Vane's collaboration with Tobias Smollett led to a brilliant experiment in the relationship between gender and genre; that the *Memoirs* of Catherine Jemmat incorporated new strategies for self-justification in response to changing kinship priorities; and that Margaret Coghlan's *Memoirs* introduced themes and strategies that created a hybrid: the political scandalous memoir. In this introduction, I position my project within the existing history of the "scandalous memoir." I then suggest how this book responds to recent questions about women's life writings, refining our history of these women's memoirs through a precise generic approach in combination with biographical and historical contexts. I end by outlining the argument in each chapter. Ultimately, I demonstrate the innovations of these daring women, whose memoirs are at times saucy, at other times sentimental, and always compelling.

Attention to eighteenth-century women's life writings has surged since the 1970s, when feminists such as Patricia Meyer Spacks turned a critical lens on the ways in which Laetitia Pilkington and others "imagine a self."[3] Their texts received further study in the 1980s by literary historians from Cynthia Pomerleau to Estelle Jelinek.[4] Felicity Nussbaum's *The Autobiographical Subject: Gender and Ideology in Eighteenth-Century England* (1989) was especially influential in analyzing the "scandalous memoirs" of British women such as Pilkington, Teresia Constantia Phillips, Charlotte Charke, Mary Robinson, and Hannah Snell, memoirs that she calls "sites of converging and competing discourses that display the ideologies of gendered character." She notes, "These works revive the Greek (male) form of public self-defense in the agora, but their content is a uniquely female situation—the Fall from chastity that transformed 'character' and all other experience." The memoirs function as "apologies in the classical sense of defense or justification within admission of guilt," and "the memoirist acts as a historian who compiles and relates the facts and encourages the reader to respond sympathetically as judge and jury."[5] Nussbaum's analysis provided a foundation for insightful analysis of the themes and forms of these life writings by Clare Brant, Vivien Jones, and Michael Mascuch.[6]

Lynda M. Thompson solidified the significance of these memoirs with the first monograph on the subject: *The "Scandalous Memoirists": Constantia Phillips, Laetitia Pilkington, and the Shame of "Publick Fame"* (2000). Thompson posits Phillips and Pilkington as the originators of the "scandalous memoir" with their respective memoirs: *An Apology for the Conduct of Mrs. Teresia Constantia Phillips* (1748–1749) and *The Memoirs of Mrs. Laetitia Pilkington, Wife to the Rev. Mr. Matt. Pilkington* (1748–1754).[7] These two writers "blazed a trail" and "made a significant if controversial contribution to the genre of autobiography. For, while confessing to a much-disapproved-of sexual adventuring, these memoirists also insisted on their own integrity and honour . . . and their right to speak out in their own defence."[8] Thompson helpfully situates their achievement within a period of cultural transition: "The memoirists seized the moment and took advantage of the indeterminacy of the boundaries between public and private spheres." They used their experiences to protest "women's unjust treatment at the hands of, firstly, husbands and lovers and, secondly and more fundamentally, the law itself."[9] Thompson's monograph focuses most closely on the memoirs of Pilkington and Phillips but also briefly analyzes the life writings of others—Lady Vane and Mary Robinson, for instance—in relation to recurring issues. Thompson also compares the mid-century memoirs of Phillips and Pilkington with the *cause célèbres* of pre-Revolutionary France, identifying parallels between the British and French traditions, including the appeal to public opinion, envisioned as more just than the legal system. However, Thompson positions the English tradition of "scandalous memoirs" as "slightly earlier" than the French.[10]

Thompson's monograph helped to shape discussions about key texts and themes within this literary tradition. Pilkington and Phillips have emerged as the founders of this tradition in mid-eighteenth century England, and their writings have received substantial analysis.[11] A series of essays have analyzed these and later memoirists in relation to recurring themes, such as the justification for publishing their "shame." Thompson notes that the memoirists "confessed to 'frailty' not only as a marketing technique but also in order to turn their own admission into a weapon with which to attack those men who had caused their 'Ruin', and the society which indulged *them* while spurning 'fallen' women."[12] Laetitia Pilkington, for instance, promises readers "a lively Picture of all my *Faults*, my *Follies*, and the *Misfortunes*, which have been consequential to them." Her story, she says, will teach female readers the value of reputation: "So that I propose myself, not as an Example, but a Warning to them; that by my Fall, they may stand the more secure."[13]

Another key theme in many memoirs is financial distress. In her *Memoirs*, Pilkington denies prostituting herself sexually, but she does describe her pecuniary difficulties and efforts to support herself as a writer. Pilkington "playfully sets up her memoirs, her verse and her stores of anecdotes and excerpts taken from male poets, as saleable property," Daniel Cook observes. She is "a very willing pen for hire."[14] The publication of her narrative for profit rendered her notorious as well as famous, and Norma Clarke analyzes Pilkington's negotiation of the social complexity when she published her first volume by subscription: "At first it had been slow because people were nervous about having their names printed as was usual in subscription publishing (and part of the appeal). Realising this, Mrs. Pilkington announced she would not print a list of subscribers."[15] By the third volume (published posthumously), Pilkington gloats over the power of her pen: "Many indeed are glad to become Purchasers. Persons whom I know nothing of, come and beg I may not put them into the Third Volume; and they will subscribe."[16] The scandal of publication was heightened in the case of Teresia Constantia Phillips, a professional courtesan who not only published for profit but also openly engaged in blackmail. Having married an "eminent Dutch Merchant" who annulled their marriage, Phillips resented the contrast between her poverty and Muilman's wealth. Laura Rosenthal has incisively analyzed how her

Apology is "mostly a story about money." Phillips's representation of her relationship with Tartufe provides a telling example: "Phillips offers little erotic revelation but considerable detail about who paid for dinner. The autobiography reads more like a bill of accounts than a sentimental journey: These former lovers *owe* her." Most strikingly, "Phillips appears to accept her own sexual labor as a commodity; she only objects to insufficient compensation."[17] Profit also motivated many later "scandalous" memoirists to publish their life stories. Elizabeth Gooch published her *Appeal to the Public* (1788) while imprisoned for debt, thus pressuring her family to release funds for her support. Margaret Leeson issued her memoirs to support herself and, her editor Mary Lyons notes, "with a possible secondary agenda of shaming some of her debtors into settling their account with her."[18] Harriette Wilson continued Phillips's blackmail tradition on an even grander scale.[19]

The memoirists often link the necessity for such publication with the injustice of a legal system that privileged husbands, the double standard that punished only women, and the cruelty of former "friends." A number of memoirists were involved in legal battles: Pilkington's husband divorced her for adultery; Phillips and her husband engaged in nearly two decades of legal wrangling; Lady Vane and her husband repeatedly entertained the public with their lawsuits; and Elizabeth Gooch, an heiress, claims to have been defrauded by her husband and his attorney, leaving her destitute. Throughout the memoirs, women bring their cases before the public for a new trial. A key defense is illuminated by Lynda Thompson, who analyzes how some eighteenth-century memoirists responded to the charge of sexual frailty to "reinforce the protest against sexual inequality." Catherine Jemmat, she notes, "invokes 'frailty' in order to insist that it was the *outcome*, not the original cause, of the breakdown of her marriage.... Any 'frailty' was an indication of her unprotected position—a sign of her situation not her nature."[20] The vulnerability of women is evident within their birth families as well as their marriages, as Julie Peakman observes in relation to later "whore biographies." Margaret Leeson details the abuse of her brother, Harriette Wilson expresses fear of her father, and Julia Johnstone describes the neglect of her parents.[21]

Recently scholars have raised new questions about the ways in which we study eighteenth-century British women's life writings. As Amy Culley observes, "[A]pproaching life writing as an expression of a personal feeling by a single author has tended to obscure its importance as an articulation of relationships and communal identities or as a contribution to the history of a family, community, or nation."[22] Culley and others have modeled ways in which we might study life writings in relation to collaboration, literary influence, modes of circulation, and fluid generic boundaries. Gillian Dow, for instance, has called for a more comparative approach to the memoirs of French and British women, and has begun "mapping out the importance of French women's life writing in Britain in the long eighteenth century." Dow focuses on the memoirs of Madame de Maintenon and Madame de Genlis, arguing, "The voluminous letters and memoirs of French women had made their indelible mark in Britain: it remains, now, for specialists of English literature of the long eighteenth century to rediscover their richness and diversity."[23] Likewise, scholars have prompted us to consider the ways in which memoirists were in dialogue with male writers as well as each other. For instance, Harriette Wilson's *Memoirs* respond to the life and writing of Lord Byron, and they also inspired a counternarrative supposedly written by her rival, Julia Johnstone.[24]

Amy Culley also examines the many ways in which women's life writings combine or escape from generic forms, a point she demonstrates through analyzing texts by early Methodist women, eighteenth-century and Regency courtesans, and women who wrote about the French Revolution. The fluid nature of many of these life writings has often resulted in their exclusion from studies of women's memoirs. For instance, personal histories of the French Revolution are often excluded because they "do not adhere to the conventional bildungsroman structure of autobiography and frequently combine personal reflections with correspondence, travel, historical narratives, and accounts of the lives of others."[25] The life writings of courtesans are likewise mixed: Elizabeth Steele's memoir of Sophia Baddeley is at once biography and autobiography; Elizabeth Fox's unpublished journal is a detail of her later life, a celebration of her husband, and a record of a particular political milieu. The latter text enables Culley to "challenge the courtesan's exclusive association with print culture and the mechanisms of publicity."[26] Victoria Joule has also thoughtfully analyzed the "fluidity and exchange between life-writing and fiction" in the writings of Charlotte Lennox and three "scandalous memoirists": Lady Vane, Laetitia Pilkington, and Teresia Constantia Phillips."[27]

I address many of these concerns raised in recent analyses of life writings, particularly in relation to a comparative approach, collaboration, methods of circulating life stories, and the fluidity of forms. However, my project differs in both focus and theoretical approach. First, it examines memoirs that have seemed problematic or less relevant: life writings by Madame de La Touche, Lady Vane, Catherine Jemmat, and Margaret Coghlan. Second, it clarifies the innovations in those memoirs using a more precise generic approach in combination with attention to historical and biographical contexts. In focusing on genre, I draw upon the insights of Alastair Fowler, who describes *genre* as "a communication system, for the use of writers in writing, and readers and critics in reading and interpreting."[28] For writers, it provides a model or, in Claudio Guillén's words, "an invitation to the actual writing of a work."[29] A genre is therefore not a checklist but a starting point. As a result, Fowler notes, "genres are actually in a continual state of transmutation. It is by their modification, primarily, that individual works convey literary meaning."[30] To understand a literary text and its significance, we must therefore understand what it is and how it responds to its form. A generic description also enables us to trace the history of a form, from its crystallization through its evolution to its demise. We can see, for instance, how a subgenre gradually adds features, fuses with other forms to create hybrids, and eventually ceases to be culturally relevant. The memoirs I analyze belong to a subgenre of memoir that I have described elsewhere as the "female appeal memoir."[31] I use the term to focus attention on what the form does (as opposed to readers' responses) and to distinguish it from its countergenre, the whore biography.

I define the "scandalous memoir" or "female appeal memoir" as a subgenre of the autobiographical memoir. It contains features of that larger genre as it appeared in the eighteenth century, blending the personal with anecdotes of others, thereby increasing the potential for sales and positioning the author socially. It also features an informal, conversational style. At the same time, the appeal memoir (the general model) adds a combination of six features. First, it is a self-authorized memoir of female distress. By "self-authorized," I mean that the subject either wrote it or contributed to it, affirming its authenticity. The distresses may include the loss of chastity, reputation, money, family, and/or profession. Second, the author appeals her a lot to a public tribunal, asking readers to form a new judgment on her character and to support her emotionally or financially. Denied justice by the legal system, family, or society, she asks for a more impartial hearing of her case. Third, in defending herself, the memoirist also arraigns her oppressors, whether a husband, a jealous sister, or an entire class. She also exposes how flaws in larger institutions render women vulnerable. Fourth, the memoirist supports her case with evidence, such as