

Part I

“Forms scientific and established”: The Critical Preface, the Canon, and the Woman Critic

Dissatisfied with the quality of Elizabeth Inchbald's critical prefaces to the plays included in *The British Theatre*, Inchbald's first biographer, James Boaden, explains that like Inchbald, “Mrs. Barbauld had [...] been seduced into the engagement of furnishing prefaces to the entertaining collection of British Novels, which bears her name; but the Aikins [Barbauld's family of birth] were all scholars, and better turned, not to the discrimination of criticism, but its forms scientific and established.”¹ Boaden's remark brings together two women critics who, for all their differences both personal and critical, share the distinction of having been solicited during the first decade of the nineteenth century by respected booksellers to lend their names to literary collections offering a definitive selection of British authors in a chosen literary form. They come to Boaden's attention, then, as contributors to large projects that serve as landmarks in the history of bringing English literature to the British public. Both part of the loose-knit circle that included such well-known literary, artistic, and intellectual figures as Mary Wollstonecraft, William Godwin, Thomas Holcroft, Joseph Johnson, Joseph Priestley, Amelia Opie, Mary Robinson, Henry Fuseli, William Blake, and many others, these two women critics share similarities in personal circumstances as well. They were both mature women who came to literary criticism after achieving reputations in other forms of authorship, with Inchbald enjoying an acting career as well. Barbauld's poetry was well regarded by her contemporaries and some of her children's literature continued popular well into the nineteenth century, while Inchbald had achieved outstanding success as a playwright and novelist. Their names were well known – even celebrated – and their association with their respective literary collections could be expected to increase marketability. Still, their previous

publications had failed to secure permanent financial security for these two middle-class women, and commissions for paid literary work were welcome.

These similarities should not, however, obscure their differences. Both Inchbald and Barbauld were unusually well read for women in their day, yet their education differed greatly. Neither, of course, enjoyed an advanced formal education. As Boaden suggests, however, Barbauld, born Anna Letitia Aikin, came from a family of scholars. Though a middle-class woman Dissenter, she not only received an unusually rigorous home education from her parents, but profited as well from the family's proximity to the Dissenters' academy where her father, John Aikin, a respected classicist and theologian, taught. As a result, her scholastic attainments would have been worthy of respect even among university men. Her writing, which included poetry, devotional and educational literature, and even political pamphlets, reflected this background, and she had worked for many years as an educator herself. Inchbald, on the other hand, showed precocious abilities in reading, and throughout her life set herself study programs to facilitate professional advancement or self-improvement, but she had only the standard formal education for middle-class girls. Both her writing – mostly plays and novels – and her first profession of acting appeal to the expanding middle-class audience that turned to lighter literary entertainment during their hours of relaxation.

Not surprisingly then, Barbauld's criticism at first shows her alignment with the educated elite, and throughout her career she tends to follow a systematic plan and to offer scholarly apparatus such as classifications and definitions in her critical essays. In a similar effort to lend her work scholastic authority, Inchbald begins with cumbersome citation of sources, but quickly abandons this approach for a format that is varied and casual with a style that is light, entertaining, and often ironic. In turning away from the established forms, Inchbald finds ground for critical certainty in her own experience with the stage. Discussing progressively more popular literary forms, Barbauld too turns away from her initial concentration on the voice and concerns of a privileged few to focus her essays on the values and practices of the middle class. Meanwhile, the criticism of both these writers indicates that they saw themselves as professionals. Engaged for projects that offer specimens of the national literature to an audience increasingly encouraged to think of themselves as part of a cohesive British nation, they both offer visions of the national character and the role national literature can claim in shaping it. And they reveal attitudes

about literary composition and the nature of creativity that are at odds with the vision of a solitary, transcendent creative imagination that until recently characterized most accepted views of Romantic self-representation.²