

MELISSA BAILES. *Questioning Nature: British Women's Scientific Writing and Literary Originality, 1750–1830*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2017. Pp. 263. \$45.00 (cloth). doi: 10.1017/jbr.2018.2

With the publication of his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798, William Wordsworth announced his break with the “gaudiness and inane phraseology” of his poetic predecessors (*The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser [1974], 143) Wordsworth’s Preface is often cited as a foundational expression of what would subsequently come to be known as British romanticism. While much of Wordsworth’s Preface expresses a quasi-democratic desire to attend to the life and speech of others—specifically those living “[h]umble and rustic” lives—implicitly, and somewhat ironically, it also insists on the value of poetic originality or “genius” (Wordsworth 145). Whereas authors earlier in the eighteenth century regularly perceived themselves as standing on the shoulders of giants, Wordsworth proudly asserted his own uniqueness. (This in spite of the fact that Wordsworth’s poetic innovations were deeply indebted to key literary predecessors and collaborators—John Milton, Charlotte Smith, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Dorothy Wordsworth, among others.)

In her informative first book, *Questioning Nature: British Women's Scientific Writing and Literary Originality, 1750–1830*, Melissa Bailes shows that Wordsworth’s conception of poetic genius would survive; Charlotte Smith’s would not. *Questioning Nature* contributes to the ongoing assessment of women writers’ relationship to British Romanticism and the various dramatic historical changes that accompanied it. According to Bailes, the romantic celebration of unique poetic genius undermined certain kinds of literary and cultural authority that women writers had previously enjoyed. Women authors had, over the course of the eighteenth century, become accustomed to using two important techniques for attaining such authority: (1) literary quotation, imitation, and adaptation; and (2) the incorporation of scientific techniques and allusion. Bailes’s study shows that, by the end of the 1830s, these two strategies had lost their power to impress.

Bailes focuses her attention on a handful of notable female authors: Anna Barbauld, Maria Riddell, Anna Seward, Charlotte Smith, Helen Maria Williams, Mary Shelley, and Felicia Hemans. By conducting case studies of these authors, Bailes seeks to narrate “how [their] imaginative scientific works both shaped the literary canon and led to their exclusion from it” (1). With the exception of Mary Shelley, the authors whom Bailes addresses have only recently, over the past couple decades, been accepted into the contemporary canon in spite of having been influential in their lifetimes. Bailes’s historical analysis sheds light on the influence, both literary and scientific, these authors had within their own cultural milieus as well as on how their influence became circumscribed over time. She argues that the professionalization of science as well as of literature, which had both become well established by the end of the 1830s via scientific societies and copyright bills respectively, ultimately minimized the perceived value of women’s original contributions in both areas.

Bailes arranges her book into three sections: “Gender and Nationalism: Describing and Defining Literary Naturalism”; “Poetic and Biological Forms: Plagiarism, Originality, and Hybridity”; “Revolution and Geological Sciences: Translations, Beginnings, and Endings.” Proceeding roughly chronologically, she organizes each chapter around a single author as she aims to determine the distinctive features of each author’s approach to scientific practice (specifically, natural history) and literary composition.

With *Questioning Nature*, Bailes raises fascinating historical parallels and tensions between women’s involvement in natural history and their varying conceptions of literary originality. However, at times it is difficult for the reader to hold onto both lines of historical analysis at the same time. In some chapters, Bailes emphasizes women writers’ relationships to science and loses track of how these relationships inform or are informed by controversies

surrounding literary originality. In other chapters, the reverse is the case, with Bailes emphasizing controversies around literary originality without sufficiently exploring how these controversies are related to scientific practices. Bailes explains in her introduction that a central aim of the book is to trace the “renovating possibilities natural history held for female authors” (17). While natural history serves as a theme in each of the chapters, it is not consistently apparent precisely what type of “renovation” it afforded women nor is it consistently apparent what its “renovating possibilities” have to do with conceptions of literary originality. In each of the chapters Bailes effectively presents an illuminating body of research and work individually, but it can be difficult to glean how they combine to form an overarching argument.

Indeed, it is not until its conclusion that the book’s through line becomes fully apparent, and then it is challenging to weave all of the fascinating details that the chapters present into the larger project. For instance, by the end of chapter 2, readers are left to wonder what Maria Riddell’s intriguing use of biological hybridity to shore up British nationalism says about her relationship to literary originality. One also wonders in what ways Riddell “shaped the literary canon,” particularly given how distinctive her literary techniques seem, according to Bailes’s portrayal, to have been (1). In most of the other chapters Bailes presents similarly lingering questions, and only some of them are answered by the book’s conclusion. It is a testament to the strength of Bailes’s inquiry that it prompts a lively curiosity in the reader, but *Questioning Nature* would have been a more successful book had it left fewer questions unanswered.

Bailes makes a convincing case that, in the second half of the eighteenth century, some British women believed in their capacity to make unique contributions to natural history while others believed that natural history afforded them unique opportunities for expressing complex forms of literary creativity (including the paradoxical variety of “collective originality”) (94). By the 1830s, however, natural history no longer promised the same “social and literary authority” (9). Indeed, with the flourishing of romanticism, serious scientific practice largely lost its literary appeal. Authors became more likely to “spiritualize” or domesticate nature than to subject it to empirical inquiry (195). In pursuing complex dynamics between literature and science in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, *Questioning Nature* helps establish useful analytical frameworks for understanding such dramatic shifts. Future scholarship would do well to build on Bailes’s exploration to illuminate more fully the literary and cultural interchanges that inform these shifts and their consequences.

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HANNAH BARKER. *Family and Business during the Industrial Revolution*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. Pp. 262. \$90.00 (cloth).  
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There is a reason that the word “family” comes before “business” in the title of this book. While she has written previously on businesswomen, in this book Hannah Barker explores the social and affective relations behind family businesses. Barker concentrates on tradespeople who lived in Liverpool and Manchester in the industrial decades of the 1780s–1820s, showing us the experiences of small retailers and manufacturers, or the “lower middle class,” during the Industrial Revolution.

Six well-researched chapters break down into three larger topics: how trading families invested and managed their wealth as well as strategized about bequeathing it; the familial relationships of those in trade and the place of love and duty in those relations; and the physical spaces of tradespeople’s households. Barker (and her co-author for chapter 1, Mina Ishizu, a