

by Elizabeth K. Goodhue

talking with the dead

SARAH FIELDING'S POSTHUMOUS LIVES AS A FEMINIST CHALLENGE TO MENIPPEAN LAUGHTER

"The thing about biography," he said, "is that you always know how the story ends." This remark was made by a noted professor of eighteenth-century literature during the annual lecture at the 2009 meeting of the British Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies (BSECS). What struck me most about the comment on that chilly January afternoon was not the offhand tone in which it was voiced, but the awkward chuckles that rippled through the audience afterwards, prompting a smile—half sheepish, half relieved—from our speaker. Death was not mentioned, but it was clearly the specter giving rise to these signs of wary amusement. I couldn't help but wonder if the audience's hesitancy to laugh outright—my own included—stemmed from the fact that a joke about death's ability to render all biographies the same brought mortality uncomfortably close to the here and now that we shared as conference participants.



Portrait (possibly) of Sarah Fielding



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As I think back on that morning, it seemed even then that more was at stake in our nervous laughter than merely the dubious pleasure of *memento mori*. The moment marked our accession to the speaker's proposition that the plot of life-writing and the plot of human lives share a similar telos, one ending in death. And if the laughter at BSECS was a little uneasy that day, then mine


was doubly so. I was scheduled to present a paper the very next morning on texts that defy that plot by refusing to uphold death's finality. Are texts still "biographical" if they claim to document speech voiced from beyond the grave? The chuckles shared by the host of historians and literary critics gathered at BSECS would seem to suggest not. But thankfully, the CSW Travel Grant that I received ensured

that I left Los Angeles with the confidence to brave the assumptions of my colleagues (along with my jetlag) and argue that shades of the dead deserve to have their voices heard at a conference themed around "Eighteenth-Century Lives."

Listening to stories that refuse to fit squarely into established literary traditions has long been a hallmark of feminist scholarship. Early efforts to expand the eighteenth-century canon by including women writers were instrumental in turning critical attention toward texts like those that formed the basis for my talk, "The History of Anna Boleyn" (1743) and *The Lives of Cleopatra and Octavia* (1757), both written by eighteenth-century author Sarah Fielding (1710–1768). The "History" and the *Lives* present biographical history in the guise of posthumous autobiographical speeches, and scholars of the works have often noted how this post-mortem perspective allows Fielding's controversial queens to reflect on the stories told about them by male biographers. My conference paper, however, like the dissertation chapter from which it was excerpted, argues that Fielding offers an equally important critique of

a strain of classical satire that denies women access to the posthumous speech that men enjoy.

The satiric tradition in question came down to eighteenth-century British writers by way of Lucian of Samosata (2nd century CE), whose *Dialogues of the Dead* features the skeletal shade of Menippus of Gadara, an older Greek philosopher and satirist (3rd century BCE) whose works have since been lost. Lucian's Menippus ridicules everyone he meets in the underworld, but he offers especially strident criticism of the only woman represented there in detail, Helen of Troy. Unlike the men who occupy Lucian's Hades, Helen never speaks in her own defense. Her silence reduces the dead courtly woman to a figure that only ever means what men say—and what Menippus says is that she epitomizes the ravages that death rightfully wreaks on all beautiful objects. When, in other dialogues, Menippus encounters men trying to enter Hades bearing luxurious clothing and goods, or just good hair, he accuses them of “effeminacy.” Even once they have been stripped of their property (including their rosy cheeks and folds of flesh), he scoffs at their fragile womanly skulls,

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mocking them into a silence that recalls that of Helen.

Lucian thus not only suggests that silence is the only afterlife available to women, but also calibrates the level of access that male shades have to satiric speech against a silence coded as feminine. Surprisingly, however, Lucian's Menippean dialogues have rarely

been considered to constitute a significant antifeminist satiric tradition, particularly not in eighteenth-century studies (where Juvenal has held pride of place on that count, even though Lucian was also widely imitated). Reading Sarah Fielding's posthumous (auto)biographies against Lucian's *Dialogues of the Dead* exposes the limitations of critical assumptions about

satire's literary history and simultaneously helps make sense of why Fielding's dead queens spend their afterlives telling stories about the relationship between gender, power, and satiric language.

Analyzing Sarah Fielding's efforts to critique the antifeminist underpinnings of Menippean dialogues plays a pivotal role in my dissertation, "Graveyard Plots: Menippean Afterlives and Satiric Authorship in Eighteenth-Century Britain." In this larger project, I argue that the underworld from which Lucian's dead Menippus speaks constitutes a representational site of paramount importance for how many eighteenth-century satirists figured authorship and literary afterlife. But while male satirists such as Jonathan Swift, Laurence Sterne, and Sarah Fielding's brother Henry found an expansive afterlife of ongoing cultural critique affirmed by the laughter that Lucian's Menippus sustains after death, female writers found a genre that all too often presented eternal ridicule as the foregone conclusion of women's lives. Although Lucian's *Dialogues* refuses to plot death as the end of satire's story, his text still treats women as if their status as objects of scorn quite literally



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goes without saying. In this sense, the laughter of Lucian's Menippus betrays a far more insidious version of the assumption that one always knows the end of life's story before it begins. While "Graveyard Plots" aims to redress this assumption in various ways, one of its most crucial interventions is in listening to the voices of female satirists, like Sarah Fielding, whose revisionist contributions

to the Menippean dialogue's afterlife in eighteenth-century Britain have continued to be marginalized in histories of the genre.

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