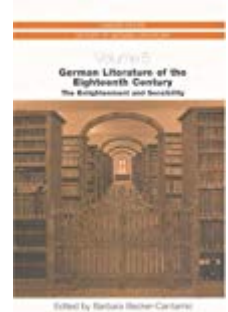


Barbara Becker-Cantarino, ed.. *German Literature of the Eighteenth Century: The Enlightenment and Sensibility*. Rochester: Camden House, 2004. x + 349 pp. \$90.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-57113-246-8.



Reviewed by Matthew Erlin

Published on H-German (December, 2005)

The ten-volume *Camden House History of German Literature* will, upon its completion, be the most extensive and detailed history of German literature in English. Volume 5, *German Literature of the Eighteenth Century*, comprises twelve essays written by an impressively international group of scholars (from the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, Austria, and Switzerland) and covers the period from roughly 1700 up through the 1780s. Specific dates or events, however, prove less significant for the determination of what is included than the two basic concepts that anchor the discussions: Enlightenment and Sensibility. The use of these venerable literary historical categories as basis for the organization the volume suggests a rather traditional approach to periodization, and this suspicion appears to be confirmed by the next three volumes in the series: on the Sturm und Drang, Weimar Classicism, and German Romanticism. It would no doubt be worth reflecting on whether such divisions accurately reflect our current understanding of how German culture should be taught, and the same question could be directed toward the decision of Camden House to devote

four of the ten volumes of its history to the roughly one hundred years between 1730 and 1830. A consideration of the project as a whole, however, is beyond the scope of this review. Suffice it to say that *Eighteenth-Century German Literature* reflects a certain conventionalism in its periodization of literary history, but that its conventionalism ends there. The individual essays, in keeping with the spirit of the Enlightenment itself, offer a refreshingly eclectic perspective on the period, adopting a variety of approaches and focusing on both traditional and non-traditional topics.

A separate chapter is devoted to each of the three major genres, which are presented through variously weighted combinations of textual analysis and social-historical contextualization. Francis Lamport stays close to the texts in his nonetheless compelling reconstruction of the developments in dramatic theory and practice that culminated in the works of Lessing. Kevin Hilliard, challenging Peter Gay's characterization of the Enlightenment as "the rise of modern paganism," elegantly maps out the forms and the social functions of both secular and religious poetry in the period. And Anna

Richards offers a judiciously redemptive reading of the literature of sensibility, drawing attention to the psychological sophistication and potentially emancipatory gender politics that characterize some sentimental novels.

Three of the essays are perhaps best described as intellectual- and social-historical surveys. Kai Hammermeister's investigation of Enlightenment thought from Leibniz to Kant first situates the German Enlightenment in its European context and then presents a concise review of some of its major preoccupations. His essay is complemented by Robert C. Holub's discussion of the legacy of the Enlightenment as manifested in the works of those intellectuals, from Hamann to Adorno, who employ the very tools of Enlightenment in order to demonstrate its limitations. The clarity with which both authors structure their essays allows them to present a wide range of complex material without overwhelming the reader. The same can be said of W. Daniel Wilson, who offers a lucid assessment of the social and political situation of eighteenth-century Germany, one that is particularly impressive for its ability to incorporate examples from the literature of the period. To these three essays one should also add Barbara Becker-Cantarino's thoughtful introduction, which lays out the aims of the volume and its relation to earlier histories of the period, presents some brief but trenchant reflections on literary historiography, and characterizes the two concepts (Enlightenment and Sensibility) that serve as organizing principles for the volume.

The remaining essays prove more difficult to categorize as a group, although they are certainly no less gratifying to read. The contributions by Rosmarie Zeller and Franz M. Eybl focus on Switzerland and Austria, respectively. Both authors succeed in giving a sense of the unique trajectory of developments in these countries as well as their participation in a common German-language literary culture. Incorporating the insights of recent scholarly work on the literary market

and the history of media, Helga Brandes provides an effective survey of the forms of eighteenth-century journalism, from the "moral weeklies" to review journals like the *Allgemeine Deutsche Bibliothek*. Sarah Colvin's exhaustive treatment of musical culture and theory in the period not only reflects the increasingly interdisciplinary orientation of Anglo-American German Studies, it also opens up new perspectives on the impact of cultural nationalism and the status of the middle class in the period. Finally, Katherine Goodman skillfully characterizes Johann Christoph Gottsched's unparalleled role as a producer and a promoter of German literature and culture.

My presentation of the essays does not mirror their actual sequence in the volume, which, although it did leave this reviewer with a sense of chronological progression, does not seem beholden to any particular ordering principle. In some respects this lack is understandable; in such an interdisciplinary history it makes less sense to identify certain topics as "background" and others as "foreground." Moreover, for those who do read the volume in its entirety, this arrangement means that key themes appear several times in different contexts, which helps to reinforce their significance for the period. Nonetheless, some readers may wax nostalgic for a time when it was possible to write a more narrative literary history, and the existing arrangement does lead to a few peculiarities. One wonders, for example, why Wilson's essay, which elucidates some of the most important concepts that figure prominently in the other essays (especially that of social class), does not appear earlier.

It is of course impossible to write a literary history that pleases everybody in all respects, all the more so given our current sense of disciplinary disorientation. Different readers will take issue with different aspects of the volume. Some, for example, will probably wish that there had been a bit more methodological reflection in the introduction, and some may wonder about the

relative paucity of explicit references to the major cultural theorists of the twentieth century. The volume also contains a few passages where the question of audience arises. Not all readers will know what to make of the characterization of Gottsched as the "German Fontenelle," or the claim that Wieland's *Oberon* is written in the manner of Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*. Like the comment on the arrangement of the essays, however, these are very minor points. The bottom line is that *German Literature of the Eighteenth Century* is an impressive accomplishment, one that takes full advantage of the opportunities offered by a multi-volume history. The contributors cite extensively from the works discussed and devote time to both canonical and non-canonical figures, but they never lose their focus or lapse into an asyndetic compilation of facts. Indeed, many of the essays are organized around innovative theses such that they will prove enlightening even to specialists.

Perhaps most important, however, is the way in which the volume reflects the concerns and the insights of recent scholarship without unnecessarily restricting its approach to the period. Its most significant achievement in this regard is the attention given to the role of eighteenth-century women as authors, readers, publishers, and cultural agents in general. The contributions of these women are addressed in virtually all of the essays. In the most interesting cases, the authors not only indicate these contributions but also reflect on how they helped to expand existing conceptions of what literature was and what it could do. The incorporation of recent work on gender, however, is by no means the only innovative aspect of the volume. The contributors also present important material on the expansion of the literary market, as well as on the role played by religion (especially Pietism) and by local and national specificities in shaping eighteenth-century German culture. The anthology approach means that each of the essays can be read as a stand-alone analysis, but they can also be combined in pro-

ductive ways. And if reading the volume in its entirety does not provide one with a grand narrative of eighteenth-century German literature, it certainly provides one with a solid sense of the period's major intellectual and cultural preoccupations. Finally, the comprehensive index also makes it possible to use the book in a more focused manner, and the extensive bibliography of both primary and secondary literature shows readers where to turn for more information. In short, *German Literature of the Eighteenth Century* will serve as an invaluable reference for a wide range of readers, both students at the undergraduate and graduate levels as well as faculty who need an accessible and readable survey of the period for their own teaching and research.

In considering the status of the eighteenth-century in Anglo-American German Studies, one is tempted to paraphrase Adorno: It has become self-evident that nothing concerning the period is self-evident anymore, not its inner life, not its relation to the world, not even its right to exist. This is hardly the ideal context in which to be writing a literary history, and it is a tribute to the authors of this volume that they manage both to reflect the complexity of current thinking about the period and provide the reader with a comprehensive and compelling overview.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

Citation: Matthew Erlin. Review of Becker-Cantarino, Barbara, ed. *German Literature of the Eighteenth Century: The Enlightenment and Sensibility*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. December, 2005.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11286>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.