Disappearance: How shifting gendered boundaries motivated the removal of eighteenth century boxing champion Elizabeth Wilkinson from historical memory

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Abstract

In the eighteenth century, one fighter’s reputation outshone all others. She was Elizabeth Wilkinson, a bare-knuckled, trash talking, knife wielding, European boxing champion. Both throughout her life and a century and a half thereafter, writers heaped praise at her feet. She provided a point of imperial pride for authors that pointed to her as proof that the British of both genders were strong and brave. This began to change at the end of the nineteenth century. As the British Empire seemed in danger of collapse and the American economy shifted unpredictably, men on both sides of the Atlantic basin began to redefine their masculinity. They embraced a new form of passionate manhood that judged men as lovers, athletes, and for their ability to give and withstand pain in the boxing ring. Boxing, which had long been British regardless of gender, now became male, regardless of nationality. Men built a mythical past for boxing that ignored Wilkinson and crowned one of her contemporaries, James Figg, the sport’s first champion.

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18th century prose The eighteenth century, however, if it was not a great age of poetry, was great in prose, and in other realms of prose than that of theatrical comedy. At its outset the short essay was almost perfected by Steele and Addison in the pages of the Toiler and the Spectator. Pamphleteering was elevated into a fine art by Defoe and Swift. Defoe, in a series of works unmatched in their realism from the Journal of the Plague to Robinson Crusoe, created the English Novel; and Swift made the travels of Gulliver to Lilliput and Brobdingnag almost as convincing as the adventures of Cruso In the eighteenth century the years after the forties witnessed a wonderful efflorescence of a new literary genre which was soon to establish itself for all times to come as the dominant literary form. Of course, we are referring here to the English novel which was born with Richardson's Pamela and has been thriving since then. When Matthew Arnold used the epithets "excellent" and "indispensable" for the eighteenth century which had little of good poetry or drama to boast of, he was probably paying it due homage for its gift of the novel. The eighteenth century was the... But as David Daiches puts it in A Critical History of English Literature, Vol.