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Lewd and Notorious: Female Transgression in the Eighteenth Century

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Accounts of women's transgressive behavior in eighteenth-century literature and social documents have much to teach us about constructions of femininity during the period often identified as having formed our society's gender norms. Lewd and Notorious explores the eighteenth century's shadows, inhabited by marginal women of many kinds and degrees of contrariness. The reader meets Laetitia Pilkington, whose sexual indiscretions caused her to fall from social and literary grace to become an articulate memoirist of personal scandal, and Elizabeth Brownrigg, who tortured and starved her young servants, propelling herself to an infamy comparable to Susan Smith's or Myra Hindley's. More awful women wait between these covers to teach us about society's reception (and construction) of their debauchery and dangerousness.
The authors draw upon a rich range of contemporary texts to illuminate the lives of these women. Astute analysis of literary, legal, evangelical, epistolary, and political documents provides an understanding of 1700s womanhood. From lusty old maids to murderous mistresses, the characters who exemplify this period's vision of women on the edge are essential acquaintances for anyone wishing to understand the development and ramifications of conceptions of femininity.
Katharine Kittredge is Associate Professor of English, Ithaca College.

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