

Introduction

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London's *Morning Herald* of Tuesday, 19 March 1782 contained a succinct guide to 'the present state of literary parties':

Mrs Thrale for *Variety*, Dr Johnson for *Charity*, Mrs Ord for *Brilliancy*; Mrs Montagu for *Universality*.¹

Here the bluestocking hostesses of the day project a flashy, contemporary force in metropolitan culture, outshining the steady moral weight of Dr Johnson's '*Charity*' with more spectacular qualities. Variety and brilliancy are attributes that suggest an element of theatricality; universality may suggest the diffusion of power. While historically, particularly in the early twentieth century, the term 'bluestocking' came to signify a dowdy and ascetic woman, in the shadow of her male contemporaries, the original bluestockings inhabited a world in which intellectual women could shine and even dazzle. Elizabeth Montagu, leading hostess of the bluestocking circle, brought together literal and metaphorical 'brilliance' at her London assemblies, where she practised a particular kind of virtuous yet opulent sociability. In 1780 Montagu wrote to her sister, Sarah Scott, to justify the large expense of her new mansion in Portman Square: 'no one can say that a great deal of money has been expended & nothing to be seen for it. My house is certainly a visible object.'² As Hester Piozzi remarked pithily, Montagu was 'brilliant in diamonds, solid in judgement, critical in talk'.³ Samuel Johnson christened Montagu 'Queen of the Bluestockings', a name that conveyed her power to preside over company with regal authority. She used visual and verbal signs to extend her influence in contemporary society, acutely aware of their power in the quest for 'universality'.

This collection of essays, by leading scholars in the fields of literature, history and art history, provides an interdisciplinary treatment of bluestocking culture in eighteenth-century Britain. While there is now a flourishing body of literary and historical work on the bluestockings, this is the first academic volume to concentrate on the rich visual and material culture that surrounded and supported the bluestocking project, from formal portraits and sculptures to commercially reproduced prints and souvenirs.⁴ The majority of essays published here were first aired at a

conference held at the National Portrait Gallery in 2008 to accompany a major public exhibition of bluestocking portraits: 'Brilliant Women: 18th-Century Bluestockings', curated by Elizabeth Eger and Lucy Peltz. The show aimed to convey the immediacy and effectiveness with which the bluestockings used conversation, patronage and print culture to advance their education and cultural presence, and many people were surprised to find that these eighteenth-century women not only earned a living from their writing but were publicly celebrated as 'living muses', icons of national pride. As E. J. Clery writes in her essay, 'The bluestocking writers of the eighteenth century, for so many years of interest to only a small cohort of scholars, their survival in the historical memory chiefly dependent on old texts and a few new academic monographs, again had a presence in public space.'⁵

In promoting female intellect, bluestocking women were profoundly conscious of the connection between reputation and representation. This book pursues the connection, addressing questions of performance, gender, celebrity, display, image and identity, revealing how intellectual women used portraiture to advance their work and reputations but also considering to what extent society's conventions of feminine representation imposed restrictions upon bluestocking identity. Contributors have highlighted the specific historical and gendered character of female visibility, addressing its ambiguities, difficulties and limits, as well as its achievements.

The three parts to the book, 'Portraiture', 'Performance' and 'Patronage', focus on the central means by which the bluestockings created and extended their cultural and intellectual network. While each term is addressed separately, contributors have emphasised the interconnections between these mutually reinforcing spheres of cultural activity. As Marcia Pointon's groundbreaking work has shown, the history and analysis of any portrait inevitably involves the consideration of questions of performance and patronage, and often reveals a range of intellectual, social and cultural networks.⁶ And the point is not limited to portraiture: as social anthropology has shown, objects too may have rich metaphorical power as the means of forging communal ties.⁷ Drawing upon these developments in neighbouring disciplines, literary scholars have increasingly started to consider texts as part of a broader spectrum of cultural signification and to consider their material properties and histories as integral to their meaning.⁸

The history of the term 'bluestocking' itself demonstrates how a specific object can accrue different cultural resonances over time, to become an identifying label for a particular type of individual or group.⁹ During the eighteenth century, blue stockings were associated with work and usually

made of worsted wool or cotton. Aristocrats and gentry favoured white silk, the standard dress for those attending formal polite assemblies such as those Elizabeth Montagu held in Mayfair.¹⁰ Eighteenth-century women of virtue rarely exposed their stockings in polite society, so it is not surprising that the original bluestocking was a man, the botanist Benjamin Stillingfleet, as reported by the *Gazetteer and Daily Advertiser* for Tuesday, 8 November 1792:

The origin of the BLUE STOCKING CLUB is thus related, from the respectable authority of Mr. BOSWELL.

The late Dr Stillingfleet, a man of extensive literature, and of great facility in the exertion of his powers, was much attached to the company of ladies of the higher class, both in talents and rank.

The Gentleman happened to have one outward peculiarity – that of appearing constantly in blue stockings – and this was of course, much noticed.

It came at length, to be observed at whose houses he visited most frequently, and there was a sort of pressure of company when he was expected: for the communication of knowledge and the exercise of his wit was as acceptable to his hearer, as it was easy to himself. When his absence at such a meeting was once lamented, somebody happened to say, ‘Ah! we can do nothing without the bluestockings!’ The saying was often repeated and, afterwards, when many of his friends chose to form themselves into society, this trifling peculiarity of their common tutor was so much remembered that they could take no other name than that of ‘THE BLUESTOCKING CLUB’.

The fact that the origin of the term bluestocking was already a topic of discussion by 1791 suggests something of the circle’s public impact. The chief bluestocking hostesses besides Elizabeth Montagu were Elizabeth Vesey and Frances Boscawen – like her, wealthy and well-connected women who used their influence to attract the leading minds of their day to their London homes. Guests included Samuel Johnson, Elizabeth Carter, Joshua Reynolds, David and Eva Garrick and Horace Walpole, and later Frances Burney and Hannah More. Such was bluestocking support for female education and writing that by the 1770s the term started to refer solely to women. One of the most significant achievements of the original bluestocking hostesses was to encourage, by example and through patronage, women to enter the public literary sphere who might not have thought of publishing their work. By the 1790s, the term bluestocking had achieved a wider currency and was used to evoke independent women who were bound together by a common spirit and inspired by the example of others to create their own literary and social circles, in both London and the provinces. At a time when women had little access and no right to

education, let alone legal or economic equality with men, the bluestockings achieved remarkable cultural visibility and even celebrity, opening new possibilities for the intellectual woman ‘of the higher class’ (to repeat the phrase used in the *Gazetteer and Daily Advertiser*). As this phrase suggests, too, the freedoms won were not boundless or pure; and the essays in the present volume deal also with the more uncomfortable aspects of bluestocking culture, including questions of competition, rivalry and exclusivity.

Part I of the book, Portraiture, examines both the making and the viewing of portraits. Anne Mellor’s opening chapter, ‘Romantic bluestockings: from muses to matrons’, provides an overview of the public perception of women writers – and their right to a ‘vocation’ – from Enlightenment to Romantic cultural moments. Mellor draws upon a wide range of visual evidence to explore the changing visual representations of learned women, especially authors, from the late eighteenth century to the early Victorian era. The initial and very positive image of brilliant women as muses, captured in Richard Samuel’s *The Nine Living Muses of Great Britain* in 1779, was gradually transformed as women writers entered the profession in ever growing numbers. By 1800, these intellectual ‘bluestockings’ had become the object of widespread derision. What caused this change? And how did women of the Romantic era respond to it? By looking both at popular satirical verses and prints and at the ways in which women chose to represent themselves in portraits and frontispieces, Mellor traces the gradual transformation of the bluestocking muse into a respectable matron of Victorian literary culture.

E. J. Clery’s chapter, “‘To Dazzle let the Vain design’: Alexander Pope’s portrait gallery; or, the impossibility of brilliant women’, looks back to the early eighteenth century in its discussion of the portraiture of Alexander Pope and Elizabeth Carter. Pope’s *Epistle to a Lady* (1735) – the source of such well-known epigrams as ‘most women have no characters at all’ and ‘ev’ry woman is at heart a rake’ – raises a number of questions pertinent to the discussion of bluestocking portraits. Why does he present his satire on women in the form of a tour of a picture gallery? What theory of gender underlies the denial of the possibility of genuine distinction in women? And how did celebrated female literati, at the time and later, respond to this attack by the most eminent poet of the age? Clery focuses particularly on Pope’s connections with Mary Wortley Montagu and Elizabeth Carter, also referring to the ways in which the major literary figures of the next generation, Samuel Johnson and Samuel Richardson, actively cultivated female genius as a mark of their separation from Pope and his political and cultural legacy.

The bluestocking authors have frequently been represented as having an uneasy relationship with literary fame, yet, as Clare Barlow argues in her chapter ‘Virtue, patriotism and female scholarship in bluestocking portraiture’, their portraits depict them overwhelmingly as scholars and writers. Ramsay’s 1762 portrait of Elizabeth Montagu shows her leaning on Hume’s *History of England*, and Elizabeth Carter was depicted first as Minerva, goddess of wisdom, then later as a Roman matron holding a book and a pen. Such images diverge from contemporary portraiture to display the foundations of bluestocking identity: irreproachable virtue, patriotism and intellectual ambition. This essay uses visual culture to reinterpret bluestocking attitudes to celebrity, examining the ways in which the bluestockings used portraits to promote ‘a woman’s right to literature’.

While literary women became widely accepted as contemporary icons of civilised society, at least for a brief period of time, it was arguably much harder to achieve success and fame in a realm as resolutely masculine as sculpture. Alison Yarrington’s chapter, ‘Anne Seymour Damer: a sculptor of “republican perfection”’, is concerned with the ambition and professional recognition of the sculptor Anne Seymour Damer (1748–1828) and dwells on her reputation as a woman of radical politics. She was described in 1788 by Sir William Hamilton as spending her ‘serious Athenian mornings’ in the pursuit of sculpture, showing works as an ‘honorary exhibitor’ at the Royal Academy exhibitions between 1784 and 1818, and her evenings ‘with the more light-hearted pleasures of amateur theatricals’. Art and drama were central to her life, her interest in these two areas being encapsulated in her creation of a statue of Apollo for Drury Lane Theatre, and her association with the playwright Joanna Baillie. Damer’s complex personality may be best summed up in Mary Robinson’s verdict on Sappho: ‘a lively example of the human mind, enlightened by the most exquisite talents, yet yielding to the destructive control of ungovernable passions’.

Like many women of the bluestocking circle, Damer lived a notably long life. Devoney Looser scrutinises the subject of bluestocking old age in the final chapter in this section. In general, both written and visual representations of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century British women in old age have received short shrift, despite the fact that Frances Boscawen, Frances Burney, Elizabeth Carter, Elizabeth Montagu, Hannah More and Hester Lynch Piozzi lived into their eighties, with many others in the circle living well into their seventies (Damer lived to 80). A recent exhibition explored Mary Delany’s astonishing achievement as a botanical paper cutter, an art she invented and started to pursue only in her seventies.¹¹ As Looser argues in

‘The blues gone grey: portraits of bluestocking women in old age’, accounts and images of these and other bluestocking women in late life offer compelling evidence of how they were understood individually and collectively. The essay elucidates the ways in which what we now call ‘ageism’ functioned in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and shows how these representations cast light on the eighteenth century’s contradictory understandings of, and expectations for, elderly women.

Part II of the book addresses the central role of Performance in defining bluestocking identity, exploring the realms of singing, acting and sociability as interconnected points on a spectrum of cultural activity. As several commentators, from Elizabeth Carter onwards, have remarked, Richard Samuel’s painting of Britain’s ‘Nine Living Muses’ presents a rather static group of figures, poised on the brink of utterance.¹² Taking that portrait’s central figure, Elizabeth Linley, as his subject, Joseph Roach traces the active world of bluestocking performance in his chapter “‘Mistaking Earth for Heaven’: Eliza Linley’s voice’. Roach draws out connections and distinctions between different definitions of voice: while in the simplest sense, the word refers to an individual’s capacity to produce sound, it is also used to refer to a ‘calling’ and is built into the notions of *invocation*, *evocation* and *vocation*. Elizabeth ‘Eliza’ Sheridan, née Linley (1754–92) possessed a charismatically extraordinary voice, and she was duly deified by her contemporaries. This essay argues, however, that Eliza Linley also possessed an exceptional voice in the creative sense, a manner of projecting her own persona poetically, even though she wrote few verses. The evidence for such a claim resides in the traces of her ‘voice’ – both poetical and physical – left behind in the nearly idolatrous images of her made by a wide range of writers and painters. “‘Mistaking Earth for Heaven’: Eliza Linley’s voice’ shows how one gifted woman found her voice and made it public in the way she wanted it to be heard – as her vocation.

Part of Elizabeth Linley’s attraction was her Englishness – in contemporary reviews, her simplicity and directness of voice was frequently contrasted with the ornate flourishes of Italian sopranos. In her chapter, ‘The learned female soprano’, Susan Staves provides an account of the world of eighteenth-century female sopranos, notably Faustina Bordoni Hasse and Gertrud Elisabeth Schmaling Mara, showing how they successfully challenged reigning assumptions that only men – in this case, castrato sopranos – could master the challenges of the leading roles in opera. Like some of the castrati stars, Bordoni and Mara were famous for perfecting a modern ‘brilliant’ style of singing, one characterised by fast tempi, bold and accurate negotiation of difficult vocal leaps, and improvised ornamentation

and cadenzas. It was widely believed that, although women could, in some sense, sing, women by nature could not be such good soprano singers as castrati. Why should the bluestockings, typically so eager to celebrate women who successfully challenged misogynistic assumptions about women's incapacity, not have been more conspicuous supporters of female sopranos? Staves analyses textual and iconographic sources to show how singing was constructed as both a sensual and a learned art. Bluestocking hostility towards musical education for women and towards women public singers, expressed in conduct books, books on education and novels, is contrasted with bluestocking enthusiasm for singers, revealed in diaries and private letters, including those of Frances Brooke, Hester Thrale Piozzi, Frances Burney and Anna Seward.

In 'Roles and role models: Montagu, Siddons, Lady Macbeth', Shearer West considers how three women over as many generations – Elizabeth Montagu, Sarah Siddons and Anna Jameson – read the character of Lady Macbeth against the grain, how representations of Siddons in that role clashed with Siddons's own critical vision of the character and ultimately how engagements with Lady Macbeth reveal women in public life exploring their own subjecthood and imagining themselves outside the norms of piety, integrity and virtue that were particularly valued by the first-generation bluestockings. Elizabeth Montagu's *An Essay on the Writings and Genius of Shakespeare* and Sarah Siddons's *Remarks on the Character of Lady Macbeth* both express significant sympathy for a character who was maligned by readers and theatre-goers throughout the eighteenth century. Despite their very different perspectives and educational backgrounds, both Montagu and Siddons saw Lady Macbeth as continuously plagued by her duties and virtues as a woman, struggling against her aversion to the violent act she is compelled to perform. However, portraits of Siddons performing the role of Lady Macbeth usually represent the actress as violent, physically intimidating, bestial or 'unsex'd'. This chapter discusses Siddons's place within a 'bluestocking' ethos, as a woman without formal education who attempted to build an image of herself as both respectable and capable of an intellectual approach to her art.

The final chapter of Part II, Felicity Nussbaum's 'Hester Thrale: "What Trace of the Wit?"', examines the gendered nuances of contemporary reactions to 'wit' in a woman. Hester Lynch Salusbury Thrale Piozzi is often considered, along with Frances Burney and Hannah More, to be a second-generation bluestocking. She regularly, however, registered a wilful departure from bluestocking refinement, describing Elizabeth Montagu's 'hothouse' as superior to her 'weeds'. After her husband's death, she

scandalised the blues and wounded Samuel Johnson in marrying Gabriel Piozzi, her daughters' music teacher and a much younger man. Piozzi experimented with traditionally male genres, including a dictionary infused with political opinions, *British Synonymy: or an Attempt at Regulating the Choice of Words in Familiar Conversation* (1794), an apocalyptic world history entitled *Retrospection* (1801), travel accounts such as *Observations and Reflections Made in the Course of a Journey Through France, Italy and Germany* (1789) and the posthumously published *Thraliana*, her diaries from 1776 to 1809. Thrale's gatherings at Streatham, her country estate, rivalled Elizabeth Montagu's London assemblies. Among her illustrious visitors were 'The Streatham Worthies', whom Sir Joshua Reynolds painted in a dozen portraits, including Arthur Murphy, Oliver Goldsmith, Joseph Baretti, Charles Burney and, most prominently, Johnson. Mrs Thrale composed clever verse characters on each, including a poem on a thirteenth portrait of herself with Queeney, her eldest daughter (1777–8) in which she charged that Reynolds's picture obscured her wit and her Welsh heritage. The painting and poem provide instructive counterpoints to Richard Samuel's *Nine Living Muses*, and they reveal competing cultural assumptions regarding feminine intellectual authority. Nussbaum reassesses Thrale's complicated relationship to the bluestockings, her views regarding British femininity and her position as a brilliant, if unorthodox, woman in the polite and commercial society of the 1770s and 1780s.

In Part III of the book, 'Patronage and networks', the intellectual and emotional connections of the bluestocking circle are described from a diversity of perspectives that shed new light on the relationship between public and private life, and illuminate the nature of women's literary authority as patrons and objects of patronage. Markman Ellis's 'Reading practices in Elizabeth Montagu's epistolary network of the 1750s' explores reading as a sociable practice, highlighting the ways in which Montagu's circle was both typical and distinctive within the correspondence culture of mid-eighteenth-century England. Ellis's analysis of social networks, made through his meticulous tracing of the reading records provided in Montagu's correspondence, is highly revealing of contemporary attitudes towards economic and emotional ties between individual members of the bluestocking circle, as well as emphasising the achievement of the group in allowing women to cross the line between scribal culture and print publication.

Elizabeth Montagu's salon was sometimes set against the Royal Court by her contemporaries, who sought out her assemblies as spaces in which the factional politics of court were put aside and harmony achieved in

diversity. In her chapter, ‘The queen of the blues, the bluestocking queen and bluestocking masculinity’, Clarissa Campbell Orr focuses upon Montagu and other wealthy or high-ranking bluestocking patrons, and the cultural politics of royal and gentlemanly masculinity. Firstly, Campbell Orr explores the bluestockings’ connection to Queen Charlotte and their common interest in education, manners and morals, and their mutual friendship with various educators and moralists such as Bishop Hurd, Leonard Smelt, Mary Delany and Mary Hamilton. Secondly, she looks at representations, and actual role models, of masculinity. The discussion is prompted by Zoffany’s portrait *Queen Charlotte with her Two Eldest Sons*, which depicts the Prince of Wales as Telemachus, the young prince in the eponymous conduct novel by Bishop Fénelon, tutor to Louis XIV’s grandson. His precepts were still current in the 1760s, but they now competed with the sentimental naturalism of Rousseau’s fictional model pupil, *Emile*. This was widely read in royal and aristocratic circles, yet its author’s heterodox religious views presented problems for the queen and the bluestockings alike. Mrs Montagu’s protégé, Noel-Joseph Desenfans, tried to reconcile the precepts of Fénelon and Rousseau, and also made Mrs Montagu the centre of his defence of Fénelon against criticisms by the Earl of Chesterfield, widely deplored as an exponent of aristocratic libertinism. Further contrasts in bluestocking masculinity between the courtly manners of Chesterfield and the bearish demeanour of Johnson, the King’s pensioner and frequent guest of Mrs Thrale, suggest the difficulty for the queen and the bluestockings, especially Mrs Montagu, in reconciling politeness, domesticity and Christian virtue with manliness.

Finally, in ‘Luck be a lady: patronage and professionalism for women writers in the 1790s’, Harriet Guest explores the transitional decade of the 1790s in terms of the relationship between older systems of patronage and a new kind of economic professionalism. Guest discusses the reputation of Mary Robinson in the 1790s, as she made the difficult transition from the circles of the fashionable *demi-monde* to those of professional authorship. Guest’s account of Robinson’s ambivalent position points to a certain cultural unease in the 1790s, an unease that had significant and wide-ranging implications, particularly for literary women. Robinson’s career, as Anne Janowitz has argued, was built on an ability to perform on both stage and page with a resilience and energy that transcended contemporary moral prejudices, whereas her bluestocking predecessors were limited by the gendered confines of contemporary models of virtuous femininity.¹³

Guest’s account of Robinson’s life and career, to which portraiture, performance and patronage were central, also provides a fitting end to

this book. In her *Letter to the Women of England on the Injustice of Mental Subordination*, published under the pseudonym Anne Randall in 1799, the year before her death, Mary Robinson concluded her argument for sexual equality with a list of ‘literary characters’ from the eighteenth century that included Elizabeth Carter, Elizabeth Montagu, Hester Piozzi and Hannah More, Anne Damer, Mary Wollstonecraft, Maria Cosway and Mary Hays. Robinson’s list is notable for its inclusion of painters and poets, and for the connections it makes between the bluestockings and Romantic literary culture, and between the female voice and vocation. It is hoped that this book, through its own re-alignments and juxtapositions, will offer new understandings of the gendered construction of literary and artistic traditions in the long eighteenth century and beyond.

Notes

- 1 *Morning Herald and Daily Advertiser* (London, England), Tuesday, 19 March 1782; Issue 468.
- 2 MO 6091, 20 November 1780, Bath, Elizabeth Montagu to Sarah Scott.
- 3 C. Barrett and A. Dobson, eds., *The Diary and Letters of Madame d’Arblay* (London, 1904), I, pp. 460–1, quoted in E. Eger and L. Peltz, *Brilliant Women: 18th-Century Bluestockings* (National Portrait Gallery, 2008) p. 26.
- 4 Following the example of Sylvia Harckstarck Myers’s *The Bluestocking Circle: Women, Friendship, and the Life of the Mind in Eighteenth Century England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), important studies have included Betty Rizzo, *Companions Without Vows: Relationships among Eighteenth-Century British Women* (Athens, Georgia, and London: University of Georgia Press, 1994); Nicole Pohl and Betty Schellenberg, eds., *Reconsidering the Bluestockings* (San Marino, CA: Huntington Library, 2003); E. J. Clery, *The Feminization Debate in Eighteenth-Century England: Literature, Commerce and Luxury* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); Betty Schellenberg, *The Professionalization of Women Writers in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge University Press, 2005) and Karen O’Brien, *Women and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge University Press, 2009).
- 5 See E. J. Clery, Chapter 2 in this volume.
- 6 See Marcia Pointon, *Hanging the Head: Portraiture and Social Formation in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993) and *Strategies for Showing: Women, Possession, and Representation in English Visual Culture, 1665–1800* (Oxford University Press, 1997).
- 7 See, for example, Arjun Appurda, *The Social Life of Things* (Cambridge University Press, 1992); Victor Buchli, *The Material Culture Reader* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2002).