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0521771064 - Women, Writing and the Public Sphere, 1700-1830

Edited by Elizabeth Eger, Charlotte Grant, Cliona O Gallchoir and Penny Warburton

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: women, writing and representation**Elizabeth Eger, Charlotte Grant,  
Cliona Ó Gallchoir and Penny Warburton*

Women of literature are much more numerous of late than they were a few years ago. They make a class in society, they fill the public eye, and have acquired a degree of consequence and appropriate character.

Maria Edgeworth, 1795<sup>1</sup>

To be pointed at – to be noticed & commented upon – to be suspected of literary airs – to be shunned, as literary women are, by the more unpretending of my own sex: & abhorred, as literary women are, by the more pretending of the other! – My dear, I would sooner exhibit as a rope dancer.

Mary Brunton, 1810<sup>2</sup>

Women's place in the public sphere has been debated throughout history and is still the subject of controversy. The language of public and private spheres has been a central organising trope for women's historiography and for feminist theory; indeed, Carole Pateman claims that the dichotomy between public and private is, 'ultimately, what the feminist movement is about'.<sup>3</sup> The categories of public and private have been interpreted as equivalent to those of male and female and understood in terms of an ideology of separate spheres.<sup>4</sup> Critics and historians have frequently allowed this binary distinction to pass as quasi-natural and somehow explanatory of the inequalities between men and women, often neglecting the fact that it is born out of the commercial foundations of modern society.<sup>5</sup>

Historicised accounts of the emergence of clearly differentiated private and public realms locate the eighteenth century as a period of transition, moving from a time of comparative freedom for women into a world of separate spheres, in which men occupied the public sphere of work while women became increasingly restricted to the private sphere of the family. Historians Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall have

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complicated this model, pointing out the importance of an ideology of domesticity for both sexes in constituting their class identity.<sup>6</sup> However, it is only very recently that there has been any focus on women's activity in the wider public sphere.<sup>7</sup> While the emergence of a literary and political public sphere has been seen as definitive of eighteenth-century culture, there has been remarkably little investigation of contemporary responses to its development and scant acknowledgement of women's contribution to its character. As Linda Colley has pointed out in her recent study of British nationhood during this period, separate sexual spheres were being increasingly prescribed in theory at one and the same time as they were being increasingly broken down in practice.<sup>8</sup> The aim of this volume is to attend to the complex history of the public/private distinction by focusing on women's relation to the public sphere between 1700 and 1830.<sup>9</sup> The contributors approach this question from a variety of angles, using literary and visual sources in their exploration of the sexual politics of writing and representation in an age of cultural expansion and political transition.

Our epigraphs from Maria Edgeworth and Mary Brunton were written towards the end of a period which witnessed a substantial rise in the number of women participating in an expanding print culture.<sup>10</sup> Edgeworth and Brunton both emphasise the visibility of women writers: for Edgeworth, they 'fill the public eye', whereas for Brunton, to publish involves the risk of being a spectacle, an 'exhibition'. By the beginning of the nineteenth century contemporary opinion was increasingly ambivalent towards women who were active in the literary public sphere. Whereas Brunton alludes to the dominant negative stereotypes of a 'public woman' (a rope dancer being only a few degrees removed from a prostitute), Edgeworth asserts that for women to be acknowledged publicly as writers is dignified and indicative of progress. These very different reactions to female publication raise issues of inclusion, visibility and agency that remain the subject of debate. We are still in the process of adjusting our eyes to a vision of the past very different from that which previously held sway, as history is rewritten to include the stories of women, to make them visible once more. Feminist historians and literary scholars have begun to assess the nature and impact of the female contribution to eighteenth-century culture, to education, journalism, the theatre, literature, politics and poetry. Women were often the leaders of intellectual networks of exchange.<sup>11</sup> While there is significant interest in their literary activity, women's contribution to the broader picture of cultural transformation has tended to be neglected; there

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remains a danger that their work is understood as occupying its own sphere of values, separate from the mainstream tradition. In focusing on women's relation to the public sphere, this volume aims to demonstrate the more radical potential of feminist scholarship to question received paradigms of knowledge, to inspire new methods of research and transform our perceptions of the past.<sup>12</sup>

The conventional critical notion of separate spheres, for example, immediately appears problematic and inaccurate if approached through the contemporary writings of women. Edgeworth and Brunton's descriptions of literary women are taken from published texts which demonstrate the overlap between public and private. Brunton's letter to Mrs. Izett was published in the preface to her novel *Emmeline*, written by her husband after her death in 1818. Edgeworth's text is presented as a collection of private letters between two gentlemen, but is clearly intended to reach a public audience interested in the question of female education. Elements of disguise and deprecation in the author's self-presentation suggest the tension surrounding her cultural authority. While this volume emphasises the role of women as producers of culture, it also explores their relationship to the public gaze; in doing so, it inevitably challenges any theoretical or interpretative model of the period which constructs the public and private as mutually exclusive categories.

## THE PUBLIC SPHERE IN THEORY AND HISTORY

The period covered by this volume has been characterised as an age of grand narratives, often interpreted as the crucible of the modern age. Between 1700 and 1830 ideas of political representation and national identity were transformed, and the powers and scope of public authority redefined. While scholars have long explored the emergence of concepts of the self in this period, only recently have the gendered nature of such developments come to the fore. Political historians have started to analyse the gender assumptions within the intellectual and political structures of the period and to offer powerful new readings of women's political writings.<sup>13</sup> It is important to consider what politics and the public might have meant to women living in a society that severely restricted their legal and political representation.

Before discussing the relevance of historiographical debates over the 'public sphere' in practice and theory, it is perhaps useful to sketch a background to political notions of rights and representation in our period. Arguments over the nature of the British constitution stemmed

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from the impact of the Glorious Revolution of 1688, which thwarted the Catholic James II's attempts to establish an absolute monarchy. The invasion by William of Orange and subsequent change of ruler resulted in the creation of new constitutional, financial and religious settlements, all of which were driven by pragmatism but nevertheless established the broad principle of toleration and individual liberty. Eighteenth-century commentators generally saw the Revolution as a reassertion of historic liberties rather than a break with the past.<sup>14</sup> Whig historians viewed it as an important moment at which the rule of law and parliamentary government were extended and continued. As Paul Langford has written, the question of whether the Glorious Revolution could be repeated was a hotly disputed point: 'No government, even an unimpeachably Whig government, wished to encourage further Revolutions. Whig Churchmen played a notable part in rendering the Revolution a unique necessity, a freak in the history of freedom, dictated by the aberration of a popish, absolutist king. Oppositions preferred to maintain the status of the Revolution as living history, a perpetual warning to posterity and a precedent for similar action in future.'<sup>15</sup> At the centenary of the Revolution in 1788 the court of George III made no attempt to claim it for political purposes, and it was left to more radical opponents of the government to draw significance from the occasion.

Locke's *Two Treatises on Government*, published in 1689, provided an attempt to justify and analyse the revolution in retrospect. While the historical accuracy of his account of events is still disputed, his work marked an important departure in political and constitutional thought by focusing on contract rather than authority in his discussion of political rights. Locke was provoked to write his *Treatises* by the publication of Sir Robert Filmer's *Patriarcha, or the Natural Power of Kings* (published in 1680), an extreme statement of the view that a king's authority over his subjects was like that of a father over his family. Locke denied that anybody could exercise authority by right, arguing that a ruler must depend upon the trust invested in him by the political community, which could remove its trust if the ruler failed to comply with its interests. By placing sovereignty in the people, Locke moved beyond the norms of Whig thought, which remained governed by the relationship between the Lords, the Commons and the king. Several political theorists and philosophers of the twentieth century have traced the origins of civil society in Locke's contract theory (and in the thought of his seventeenth-century predecessors), which presented civil society as a universal realm which potentially includes all people.

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Feminist political theorists, however, have taken issue with standard accounts of liberal thought which have excluded women from their story. Carole Pateman has pointed out the potential dangers of ignoring sexual difference in approaching political difference: ‘Political theorists argue about the individual, and take it for granted that their subject matter concerns the public world, without investigating the way in which the “individual”, “civil society” and “the public” have been constituted as patriarchal categories in opposition to womanly nature and the “private” sphere. The civil body politic created through the fraternal social contract is fashioned after only one of the two bodies of human-kind.’<sup>16</sup> As she points out in her discussion of the seventeenth-century controversy over political right, women seized on the contradiction of an ‘individualism’ and a ‘universalism’ which insisted that women were born into subjection and their subjection was ‘natural’ and politically irrelevant.<sup>17</sup> In 1700, Mary Astell famously asked: ‘If *all Men are born free*, how is it that all Women are born slaves?’<sup>18</sup>

Women were critical of the inequalities embedded in the secular notion of a civil society from its inception and early definition. By the time of the American Declaration of Independence and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man, new definitions of human equality and political freedom still failed to include women.<sup>19</sup> Despite the urgent rhetoric of progressive thinkers, the rights of man were not conceived of as universal. Although some argued that political rights should be extended to more and more of the male population, few countenanced the idea of women’s rights. Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* argued that full citizenship should be extended to all. However, it would be over a century before women could exercise their right to vote. This volume aims to explore what ‘representation’ might mean to the constrained subject, and to try to perceive the ‘public’ through contemporary female eyes.

The nature and implications of such profound political transformation cannot be considered apart from transformations in the nature of the public. The period of the Enlightenment has been seen to embody a transitional ideology between a pre-industrial, aristocratic culture and an industrialised, commercialised culture, in which the idea of the public was inevitably contradictory and ambiguous. While in certain contexts the term ‘public’ was used in its current sense, to refer to a mass of citizens, it could also be used in its more classical form, to distinguish a body of educated people, usually men, from the mass of common

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people, 'the vulgar'. As Iain Pears notes, the term was used in both senses throughout the eighteenth century, and artists and writers were often faced with the problem of aiming their work simultaneously at two groups of people, aware of the benefits of addressing a wider, commercial public and yet anxious to retain the respect of the intellectual élite.<sup>20</sup> It might be argued that there was inevitably some convergence between these two senses of the 'public' and that a wider and more discerning reading public evolved in tandem with an explosion of journalistic activity.

Addison's contributions to his influential journal, *The Spectator* (1711–12), encouraged the idea that learning should be sociable and accessible to both sexes. He famously proposed that philosophy should be discussed in public: 'It was said of Socrates, that he brought Philosophy down from heaven, to inhabit among Men; and I shall be ambitious to have it said of me, that I have brought philosophy out of Closets and Libraries, Schools and Colleges, to dwell in Clubs and Assemblies, at Tea-Tables, and in Coffee-Houses.'<sup>21</sup> Addison describes scenes where men and women could meet and exchange ideas through the pursuit of conversation, then a highly sophisticated art of communication in which women's civilising role was often stressed. Women published guides to conversation which emphasised the moral and improving role of what Hannah More termed 'the noblest commerce of mankind'.<sup>22</sup> The essays in this volume implicitly chart a history of public spaces in which, among other things, the polite art of conversation was defined and contested – the coffee house, St James's Park, Vauxhall Gardens, Mrs Montagu's salon, the Society of Arts, the Royal Academy and the Parisian salon of Helen Maria Williams. The contributors explore women's representation in and of those public spaces. In diverse ways, they engage with and question the view that as the period progressed, British culture was increasingly predicated on the exclusion of women from a public sphere which assumed greater and greater significance as courtly and aristocratic power declined.<sup>23</sup> Our trajectory is from issues of visibility and scandal in part one, 'women in the public eye', through questions of improvement, virtue and morality raised by women's production and consumption of culture in 'Consuming arts', to the realm of intellectual endeavour in 'Learned ladies'. Here, discussions of the cultural authority of the Bluestockings and the phenomenon of a female political historian are followed by essays on 'Cosmopolitan intellectuals', which explore the role of translation and exchange between European intellectual movements in shaping ideas of

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nationhood. Women inevitably experienced tensions between their allegiances to their sex, nation and profession. The final part of the book, 'The female subject', addresses women's philosophical and political reflections on the nature of their place in the public sphere towards the end of our period, focusing on the culmination of female self-analysis in Mary Wollstonecraft's work of the 1790s.

This volume presents a rich and dynamic model of the relation between the public and the private. By highlighting the range and diversity of women's participation in the public sphere, it takes issue with the majority of theorists of the public sphere, who have tended to exclude women from their story. Jürgen Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere – An Enquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* is perhaps the fullest and most influential account of the emergence, development and decline of a public sphere within early modern Europe.<sup>24</sup> Originally published in 1962, and conceived partly in reaction to the pessimism of the Adorno school towards the Enlightenment and the public use of reason, his account attempts to recover the benefits of public discourse and debate which resulted from the realisation of a bourgeois public sphere. It is both a historical and a sociological account in which we can read the seeds of his later project to determine the necessary conditions for democracy. The *Structural Transformation* was published in English in 1989, nearly thirty years after its original publication. It has already had a major impact within the fields of politics, history and feminist theory.<sup>25</sup> Habermas's work fuses disparate lines of enquiry into a remarkably powerful narrative of sociostructural transformation.<sup>26</sup>

Habermas defines the public sphere as a forum in which members of the public could meet with one another to debate rationally the affairs of state. He describes it as an intermediary space, between the intimate sphere of the family and the official sphere of the state – a space free from prejudice and separate from the government, in which authority was held up to public scrutiny and the 'common good' of the people was debated. In his paradigmatic account, Habermas places great emphasis on a number of new, mainly urban institutions such as the salons, coffee-houses and taverns that flourished in eighteenth-century society. While he acknowledges the presence of women in the public sphere as readers, his attitude to them is always ambiguous. At times he appears to welcome the gradual exclusion of women, as a necessary prelude to the process whereby debates within the republic of letters assumed an increasingly political function, as in the following discussion of English coffee-houses:

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Critical debate ignited by works of literature and art was soon extended to include economic and political disputes, without any guarantee (such as was given in salons) that such discussions would be inconsequential, at least in the immediate context. The fact that only men were admitted to coffee-house society may have had something to do with this, whereas the style of the salon, like that of the rococo in general, was essentially shaped by women. Accordingly the women of London, abandoned every evening, waged a vigorous but vain struggle against the institution.<sup>27</sup>

The inaccuracy of Habermas's assumption that only men were admitted to the coffee-house is compounded by his assumption that female opinion was inconsequential whereas male opinion was of value to the public sphere. His allusion to salon culture is a necessary reminder that he adhered to a historical narrative in which the dominance of aristocratic models (and their implied accessibility to women) gave way to a society characterised by men of the professional and commercial middle classes. In developing his account, Habermas emphasises the role of male property-owners in the formation of the public sphere, omitting women altogether from its developments, as he does in his description of an idealised realm of print culture with clear political functions.

Habermas's useful description of the organisation of public space in modern life has also acted to constrain our vision of those spaces. Recent research has demonstrated the diverse ways in which women could own property in the period, enlarging our sense of their legal power.<sup>28</sup> There has also been greater acknowledgement of women's role in cementing civic virtue through their charitable work, an important aspect of public life, which reaches beyond the walls of the salon. Revisionary accounts of Habermas's work have criticised its unitary and disembodied account of the bourgeois public sphere. John Brewer and Lawrence Klein have both argued that it may be more accurate to think of public and private as being shifting, multivalent categories, rather than mutually exclusive. Brewer has demonstrated that the polarities of public and private are to a great extent interpenetrating, arguing, for example, that the letter form which we associate with the rise of the individual and the private self was also widely used to present political arguments in the public realm of print.<sup>29</sup> Lawrence Klein, pursuing a slightly different approach, locates a number of different eighteenth-century publics other than the state and Habermas's idealised realm of print culture, identifying a civic public sphere, an economic public sphere, and an associative public sphere of social, discursive and cultural production.<sup>30</sup> According to Klein, 'there is no one "public/private" distinction to

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which interpretation can confidently secure itself'. He concludes that 'the gender of these eighteenth-century "publics" cannot be determined by an a priori commitment to the publicity of men and the privacy of women'. However, like many critics of Habermas, Brewer and Klein seem in danger of merely multiplying alternative counter-public spheres, which inevitably remain in a competitive relation to the overarching concept of the dominant bourgeois public sphere.<sup>31</sup>

*Women in the public eye*

Several essays in this work take issue with Habermas's rigid categorisation according to gender, complicating his interpretation of the relation between intimacy and publicity through detailed attention to the relation between gender and literary genre.<sup>32</sup> Markman Ellis opens part one of the volume with a forceful critique of Habermas's account of the coffee-house as a masculine space. He demonstrates how, in relying on nineteenth-century accounts of the eighteenth-century coffee-house, Habermas cemented an already nostalgic and gentrified model of its character. Through his careful readings of the memoirs of contemporary 'coffee-women', Ellis offers a very different model of coffee-house sociability from Habermas, in which the moral reform of manners is replaced by a world of scandal and gossip, purveyed by the problematic and frequently transgressive figure of the coffee-woman.

Habermas's focus on a morally useful model of public opinion neglects the more unruly and negative forces of the public, whose appetite for gossip was perhaps keener than its desire to effect political change. Caroline Gonda investigates women's visibility at the borders of respectability, asking whether, if 'bad women' are 'necessarily public', all women's public appearances are therefore shadowed or tainted. She addresses the phenomenon of two pairs of women in the 1750s: the Murderesses Blandy and Jeffries, and the beautiful Gunning sisters who were 'linked not only by their place in contemporary gossip, but also by their status as spectacle, as objects of the public gaze'. Gonda contrasts these notorious couples with the 'fair penitents' of the Magdalen Hospital whose titillating presence oscillated between conventional realms of public and private. Prostitutes, frequently termed 'public women', were 'reformed' and incarcerated in the Magdalen Hospital, where they remained, paradoxically, on public display. Gonda uses these examples to argue against any easy identification of women's presence in the public eye with an assumption of agency or achieved status.

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However, it would be wrong to imply that women were only the object of public opinion. They could simultaneously act as the subject, object and predicate of gossip. As writers, women were also, of course, the manipulators of public opinion. Eliza Haywood, editor of *The Female Spectator*, was aware of the necessity of balancing instruction and entertainment in catering for her readers' needs:

I flattered myself that it might be in my power to be in some measure both useful and entertaining to the public; and this thought was so soothing to those remains of my vanity, not yet wholly extinguished in me, that I resolved to pursue it, and immediately began to consider by what method I should be most likely to succeed: To confine myself to any one subject, I knew could please but one kind of taste, and my ambition was to be as universally read as possible: from my observation of human nature, I found that curiosity had more or less a share in every breast; and my business, therefore, was to hit this reigning humour in such a manner, as that the gratification it should receive from being made acquainted with other people's affairs, should at the same time teach every one to regulate their own.<sup>33</sup>

Haywood's concern to 'hit the reigning humour' by providing gossip and current affairs without sacrificing the moral benefits of individual instruction shows a shrewd awareness of the potential pitfalls of public opinion.<sup>34</sup> Her effort to combine virtue and instruction with pleasure was matched in the reigning visual culture of her time. While Ellis and Gonda emphasise scandalous aspects of women in the public eye, Grant, Davies and Eger address the relation between moral virtue and visibility for the female sex.

### *Consuming arts*

Although women who were deemed to have transgressed their proper social boundaries were often the targets of satire and gossip, in different contexts representations of women served to symbolise the civilising influence of cultural exchange, and thus their centrality to the progress of culture. Recent historical work has explored the emergence of a critical reading public and the wider consumption of culture in a commercial age.<sup>35</sup> The influence of civic humanism in art and letters has been given particular attention and has provided invaluable routes into thinking about the relation between art and society in this period. While several influential cultural and historical studies have emphasised the links between virtue, commerce and the arts in the eighteenth century, these accounts have tended to ignore women.<sup>36</sup> Only very recently have