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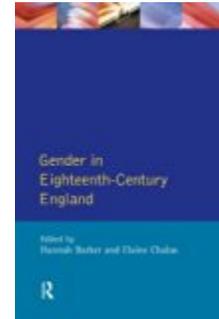
Gender Examined

Gender in Eighteenth-Century England is a diverse collection of essays edited by Hannah Barker of Keele University and Elaine Chalus of Wolfson College, Oxford. Covering a wide range of topics, the book is organized into four sections: "Sexual Representations," "Work and Poverty," "Politics and the Political Elite," and "Periodicals and the Printed Image"; additionally it includes a thought-provoking and unusually detailed introduction.

This introduction, authored by Chalus and Baker, includes not only summary information about the essays that follow but also an outstanding historiographical examination of gender history. A convincing argument is developed for the need to continue to explore gender and gender relationships at all levels, encouraging historians to look more deeply into the stories of men, and men and their relationships with women, as well as to continue the work being done on women, and the relationships women have with men. Although the masculine aspects of this urging represent somewhat controversial topics in historical circles, the authors contend that continued exploration is necessary to truly understand how men and women lived together throughout history. What follows in this regard, though, is somewhat disappointing. The essays themselves are not disappointing in content, certainly, but only one of the nine essays is specifically devoted to issues of masculinity. The editors argue that even though most of the articles are about women, they do provide readers with information about gender relations. While this is generally true, their call for more exploration of the history of masculinity goes nearly unheeded in their own volume.

The only article in the collection solely regarding historical questions of masculinity, Philip Carter's article "Men about town: representations of foppery and masculinity in early eighteenth-century urban society," examines an interesting and often misunderstood social character, the fop. Carter explores representations of these men in literature as a "social type", not actual persons, between the years c.1690-1740 (p. 33). He contends that those individuals living in the eighteenth century viewed masculinity in terms of "social rather than sexual criteria" (p. 34) and that it was the fop, not the sodomite, that was "the predominant eighteenth-century image of unmanliness," (p. 40).

Following a review of the historiography on masculinity during the period, Carter discusses the evolution of the word "fop", finding a shift in its meaning from "fool to "foolish man of fashion," (pp. 40-41). Characteristically, fops were seen as men who ignored socially accepted eighteenth-century male attire, choosing ostentatious adornment including wigs, colorful fabrics, and accessories. It is in this way fops crossed social boundaries as their attire and the behavior accompanying it called attention to themselves in ways thought unbecoming of respectable, responsible men. Their appearance at sites typically associated with serious political and financial maneuverings, such as coffeehouses, was considered disruptive and inappropriate. Additionally, their desire to seek female comment by appearing on promenades or at

the theatre was thought unbecoming of masculine behavior.

One question Carter could address is whether socially responsible, refined men who saw foppish dress and behavior as unmasculine were at the same time rejecting conspicuous material consumption. Furthermore, were these refined men also rejecting continental fashions and, with that, displaying Francophobia? In a period that has been characterized as militaristic in works such as Linda Colley's *The Britons: Forging a Nation 1707-1837*[1], were the fops seen as unpatriotic, not merely irresponsible?

Accompanying the above chapter in the section entitled "Social Reputations" is an essay written by Kimberly Crouch. "The public life of actresses: prostitutes or ladies? ", explores one aspect of women's work, acting, a form of employment that has gone largely undiscussed. She also delves into the relationship actresses have with other women.

The theatre in the eighteenth century, according to Crouch, served as an interesting confluence of three very public types of women, all of which "lived life on their owns terms"–actresses, prostitutes, and aristocratic women (p. 78). Prostitutes and aristocratic women displayed themselves in the audience, while the actresses were of course on the stage. Crouch found that over the course of the century, the actress became less associated with the prostitute and became somewhat more accepted by respected society, especially by its women. She explores a variety of sources including contemporary biography, fashion, and art.

Through an examination of the biographies of actresses Lavinia Fenton and Elizabeth Farren (both of whom married into the aristocracy), Crouch concludes there was "a shift in the way actresses were considered by the end of the century" (p. 64). Some actresses, early in the century, including Fenton, were known "for their sexual activity and had reputations for exchanging their sexual favors for a price" (pp. 61). No matter what their actual behaviors were, actresses had difficulty escaping the innuendoes of writers who saw them as nothing more than whores on stage. Publications about Fenton appearing in 1728 were less concerned with her acting talent than with her sexual prowess. Later, in *Memoirs of the Countess of Derby*, less is written about Farren's sexuality and more attention is paid to her perceived personality flaws and her acting ability.

In addition to analyzing biographical information, Crouch finds clothing to be an important intersection for actresses and aristocratic women. In the first part of the century aristocratic and noble women donated or sold their gowns from important social events to theatres. This clothing gave actresses the opportunity to gain some modicum of respectability by emulating the ladies. By century's end, however, actresses were no longer using cast-offs as a means of gaining respectability and artistic appreciation, they were instead setting fashion trends themselves and serving as consultants to the women that they had been imitating a few years earlier.

Other areas in which the author finds significant change in the relationship between actresses and ladies are in portraiture and home theatricals. Actresses moved toward more sophisticated artistic representation that became indistinguishable from those painted of aristocratic women. Simultaneously, aristocratic women chose to be more daring, revealing, and casual in posing for their portraits. In home theatricals, aristocratic women more often took to the stage themselves, seeming to emulate the actresses they had considered below themselves earlier in the century.

In the second section "Work and Poverty," the first essay was contributed by co-editor Barker. Her entry, " Women, work and the industrial revolution: female involvement in the English printing trades, c.1700-1840," examines how women were involved in the various occupations of this important trade in northeastern England and London and how these employment schemes fit existing notions of the effect of the industrial revolution. Barker relies heavily on secondary material in this article such as works by C.J. Hunt and H.R. Plomer[2] (see note 29 p. 89), but also uses contemporary biography, trade publications, and other sources to support her conclusions.

Most of the women in Barker's study, because of available source material, were middling property owners and they did not initiate businesses themselves but rather came into them through the illness or death of a male family member (p. 91). These women were most often involved in retail aspects of the trade (booksellers, circulating libraries, and stationers) and less involved in production aspects (printing and book-binding) (pp. 89-90). Through various microhistories the author illustrates that women were playing vital roles in businesses before events moved them into ownership. Most seemed to exercise a good degree of choice of how they would be involved in their business after inheritance ranging from liquidation of the assets to total control which included the supervision of male family members and employees.

Barker concludes that as the period progressed, the involvement of women did not diminish, even as the trade evolved technically early in the nineteenth century, but concedes that the two geographical areas examined may not represent the entire country. Women worked in printing as part of a family enterprise and easily stepped into ownership roles at a time when some historians have suggested that women were becoming increasingly marginalized.

Just as the two previous authors have accomplished, Susan Skedd demonstrates that women were active in the public sphere. In her chapter, "Women teachers and the expansion of girls' schooling in England c.1760-1820" she explores the growing number of commercial schools, focusing primarily on boarding schools. Not only did this increase open up educational opportunities for girls outside their family homes, but it opened up very public opportunities for the employment of women. Skedd's study focuses on Oxfordshire, relying on advertisements placed in Jackson's Oxford Journal for the basis of her argument, but draws also from letters, autobiographies, and other sources.

The expansion of teaching opportunities, according to Skedd, comes at a time in which many historians believe "women's roles and responsibilities became imbued with the ideal of the domestic, leisured and private sphere," (p. 103). Commercial schools were businesses which women could initiate on their own, and even continue upon marriage. Teaching allowed women a great deal of personal and professional independence, but opening schools was not without risk. Success came from word of mouth, advertising, and the success of previous schools in the area. One fascinating aspect of the development of commercial schools is that, as the period progressed, more women became qualified to teach in areas where men had previously served as tutors. The larger number of educated women also resulted in the diversification of subjects offered in commercial schools.

Skedd notes that there were certainly commercial schools in other areas of England and refers to them as necessary particularly those in Bath and London. Drawing from J. H. Plumb, she also notes that there were fewer of these establishments in manufacturing towns than elsewhere [3] (p. 106). Comparison of Oxfordshire to a non-university area might provide insight as to whether a university town might be more tolerant of women opening these establishments or more open to the education of girls.

In "Poor women, the parish and the politics of poverty," Richard Connors explores the lives and problems of poor women through microhistories, but also "seeks to intersect with macrohistorical subjects of separate spheres, poverty and poor relief, the authority of the state in Hanoverian society and the implications that these intersections have for gender history," (p. 129). While this seems like bold undertaking for a twenty-one-page chapter, he accomplishes his goals.

The poor of the eighteenth century left few of their own records. However, as Connors has demonstrated, historians can learn an immense amount about the lower orders through records kept by churches, courts, and other entities. These records give the poor voices. Connors finds that often the voices of poor women applying to the parish were loud. They understood the relief system and how it worked and they demanded justice from men of authority. He contends that the relief system was, in a way, a method by which many asserted their membership in the larger community. In addition, the relief system forced middle and upper class men to work with the poor in accordance with the law, but allowed them the opportunity to deny membership to the community to individuals whose settlement was elsewhere.

A few questions arise from Connors' article. In the microhistory about Elizabeth Stamper who applied to the magistrates for relief and for money to bury her children, there is confusion about the number of children she had. References made on page 138 seem to indicate she had "children and was pregnant." Yet on page 140, the author relates that Stamper applied to the parish to bury her two children. Is it two or three children? The author does a thorough job tracing the history of Stamper's needs, but then asks readers to understand that not all cases ended in the same tragic manner as Stamper's. To do this, he offers only cursory information on other cases which does not provide enough material to make the conclusion he has drawn.

Containing two chapters, the third section "Politics and the political elite" opens with " 'That epidemical Madness': women and electoral politics in the late eighteenth century". Authored by co-editor Chalus, she demonstrates that, despite their inability to cast votes, aristocratic women were active in virtually all aspects of the electoral process. Letters, diaries, and other writings of the period were used to demonstrate women's roles.

Most of women's political activity was seen on the local level and was "generally accepted, often expected, and sometimes demanded," (p. 153). Balls, Public Days, letter writing, teas, and other activities were all part of

the electoral process. Successful women were required to mingle with the diverse community ranging from other aristocrats, to aldermen and their families, to the smallest freeholder. These aristocratic women bear resemblance to women involved in the printing trades. Both supervised men in their endeavors and often superseded male family members in decision-making.

Following Chalus' chapter is a biographical essay that supports her assertions well. "A politician's politician: Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire and the Whig party, " contributed by Amanda Foreman, is certainly a forerunner of Foreman's recently published book on the duchess.[4]

The political career of Georgiana is examined in two parts. In the first segment 1774-89, and the one on which most written on Georgiana focuses, Foreman believes that Georgiana operated in a manner typical of many wives who worked to support their husbands or their husbands' interests in the political realm. Working for her husband, Georgiana gained the attention of the Whig party and its members sought use her for their own interests. Georgiana's participation in the 1784 Westminster campaign for Charles James Fox is for what she is most often remembered. She was roundly criticized for her actions during this election. Historians, according to Chalus, have looked at these criticisms only at the surface, citing the fact that she was campaigning outside her family circle as the reason for her recrimination. The author sees more to the criticism; Georgiana was operating outside accepted norms for female behavior and she mingled too closely with lower orders. Later in the chapter, Chalus does say that Georgiana and Fox had been lovers (p. 189-90). Did the sexual impropriety of a married aristocratic woman play any part in the criticism of the Duchess?

The author believes that it is the second period of Georgiana's career, from 1801 to 1806, that is the most important historically, but it has largely been unexplored. In this period, the Duchess demonstrated that she had learned from her previous problems and approached her political involvement from a different angle. She asserted her participation was on behalf of peace and patriotism, a stance with which few could find fault. Again Devonshire House became the center of political intrigue. She chose this time to work behind the political scenes and became an important mediator between the various political factions. The broad participation of Georgiana in her colorful career illustrates women were engaged in a multitude of ways in the electoral process. Criticism

did not stop her, but rather forced her to be innovative in developing a place for herself as an important politician in the Whig party.

Closing the volume is the section "Periodicals and the printed image." Cindy McCreery's "Keeping up with the Bon Ton: the 'Tete-a-Tete' series in *The Town and Country Magazine*" is a comparative examination of how men and women were represented in the gossip column "Tete-a-Tete." Over three hundred of the columns appeared between the years 1769-92 and each discussed particular romantic relationships, primarily those of aristocratic men and their mistresses, but occasionally aristocratic women or actresses were the focus.

In each edition of the magazine, the column was headed by two portraits, one of each of the persons under discussion. Graphic representations were unusual in either newspapers or magazines and portraits attached to these columns likely increased reader interest. The anonymously written columns, which were generally two to three pages in length, contained both true and fictional material. Both participants in the liaison were discussed, but the focus was generally on the aristocratic man. McCreery believes that this was because the men were more well-known and thus more interesting to the readers. Also, because of their public lives, more information would be available on the men; the mistresses were generally from the middle or lower classes and thus more obscure (p. 217). Men were identified by nicknames developed through a reference some personal trait or action while the surnames of women were usually punctuated with dashes to disguise their identities. By the end of the series women, too, were being identified by nicknames. The writings often included commentary with moral overtones which might chastise certain behaviors or exalt actions worthy of emulation.

The "Tete-a-Tete" series, according to McCreery, seems to have been written for the purpose of entertainment. However, they also reveal information on the values of eighteenth-century society. The activities of aristocratic men were seen as important and interesting, but their mistresses were seen as obscure, even temporary and less worthy of reporting. The information provided by the series' editors concerning issues of morality give us insight into societal expectations for behavior.

The final offering is Stephen Howard's " 'A bright pattern to all her sex': representations of women in periodical and newspaper biography." In this essay, the author challenges the idea of separate spheres through the examination of obituaries, biographical dictionaries, and

articles appearing throughout the eighteen century.

Just as with the "Tete-a-Tete" series, Howard found that those with property were almost always the focus of any biographical writing. When a woman was discussed, the works tended to include details on her family, how well she fulfilled her expected role within family and society, and her virtuous behavior, often excluding any information on any public roles she might have played. Biographical writings featuring a man, though, examined his life in much more detail, with particular attention paid to his public life.

As the century progressed the representations of both men and women in biographical works changed. The public activities of women, particularly those of writers and actresses, were included in the examination, suggesting society was more interested in their participation. Additionally more attention was paid to their education. As more in-depth material appeared on women, more attention was paid to the private lives of men.

One thing many of these chapters does well is challenge the notion that women were excluded from participation in the public sphere. Poor women challenged authority by appealing to Justices for relief. Printers, actresses, and teachers held jobs and interacted in the public in the same manner men did. Female politicians were active in virtually all aspects of politics. Scholars must continue to explore other aspects of participation of women (as well as men) in attempt to gain fuller knowledge of eighteenth-century society. Perhaps, too, it is important to explore more fully the reactions of those who observed the participation of these women which would enable historians to assemble a more complete picture of the interaction of the sexes.

Gender in Eighteenth-Century England contains a broad range of topics which will introduce students to gender study. The topically arranged bibliography will also provide them easy access to more scholarship in the field. As discussed above, the inclusion of more chapters on the masculine aspect of gender history would be welcome, but Carter's chapter, as well as those penned by Connors and McCreery provide some diversity. All of the articles are accessible to new students, yet they are detailed enough to assist more advanced scholars. Furthermore, the volume provides scholars with the challenge of continuing to explore all aspects of gender history in order to provide more in-depth analysis of the lives of the myriad of people living in eighteenth-century England.

Notes:

[1]. Linda Colley *The Britons: Forging a Nation 1707-1837* (New Haven, Conn. and London, 1992).

[2]. see C. J. Hunt, *The Booktrade in Northumberland and Durham to 1860* (Newcastle, 1975) and H.R. Plomer, *A Dictionary of the Printers and Booksellers Who Were at Work in England, Scotland and Ireland from 1726 to 1775* (Bibliograhical Society, Oxford, 1968).

[3]. see J.H. Plumb, "The new world of children in eighteenth-century England" *Past and Present* 67 (1974), p. 73.

[4]. Amanda Foreman, *Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire* (HarperCollins: London, 1998).

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