

WOMEN IN EIGHTEENTH CENTURY ENGLISH PERIODICALS*

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This paper is based on a study of eighteenth-century English periodicals, which are representative and illustrative of the thoughts of a large cross-section of upper-middle-class English society. The role of women in eighteenth-century society is discussed. Their position was generally reduced to an ornamental one, with subordination to, discrimination by and silence before men, though many lower class males suffered conditions not much better. Women in upper-class society shared many of the values of their male counterparts, displaying practically identical attitudes towards other races, the lower classes, revolutions, colonialism, religion, crime and punishment. Contemporary thinkers, both men and women, were pressing for an improvement in the place of women in society.

Contradictory attitudes towards women are shown. On the one hand, they can be paternalistic, defending the traditional “ornamental” role of “frail” woman. On the other hand, the education of women and girls is constantly demanded, especially in the sciences, by both male and female contributors.

Key words: *eighteenth century, periodicals, attitudes, role of women.*

Este artículo se basa en un estudio de las revistas inglesas del siglo dieciocho, que representan fielmente los pensamientos de una amplia parte de la sociedad inglesa de clase media-alta. Se estudia el papel de la mujer en la sociedad, un papel que se caracterizaba por la sumisión a, y la discriminación por, los hombres. Sin embargo, las actitudes de las mujeres de clase media-alta

que consiguen asomarse por estas revistas no difieren mucho de las de los hombres, con puntos de vista coincidentes acerca de otras razas, las revoluciones, las clases bajas, el colonialismo, la religión, el crimen y el castigo.

Entre los hombres, por una parte, existen actitudes paternalistas, apoyando el papel tradicional, “ornamental” de la mujer “frágil”. Por otra parte, destacan las hazañas de las heroínas de la historia de Inglaterra. Los que contribuyen sus artículos, tanto hombres como mujeres, exigen continuamente una mejora en la educación de las mujeres.

Palabras clave: *siglo dieciocho, revistas, actitudes, papel de la mujer.*

1. THE PERIODICALS AND THEIR CONTRIBUTORS

Magazines of the eighteenth century are almost unrecognizable side by side with their modern counterparts, but those of both ages have several characteristics in common that make them different from daily newspapers. Articles tend to be longer, and the language used is more formal and less dramatic. The types of writing included are more varied, and they are centred more on reflections, opinions and background information about these events, though periodicals still do report. The same issue in the eighteenth century often includes various genres: anecdotes, opinion articles, book and theatre reviews, fiction, riddles, mathematical problems and their solutions, and even parliamentary reports. They were an outlet for essays and short stories, and *The Lady's Magazine* and other periodicals often serialised novels, sometimes over several years. Reports on curious happenings were frequent, especially murders, drownings, overturning carts and other accidents, executions and bankruptcies (with the newly bankrupt often named). Verse was used very frequently, poetry being a mainstream literary form, not something of an oddity, like it is today. Descriptions, such as those of flowers, animals and landscapes, use a rich vocabulary which compensates in part for the lack of illustrations.

Most of the volumes studied here are composed of collections of the different issues of magazines, sometimes painstakingly gathered from private hands by later editors and their collaborators. When collections were made, they tended to group together contributions of the same genre.

The Gentleman's Magazine is really a series of quotes in indirect speech, many articles being simply material from other publications, but it also contains original instructive articles, conundrums, cookery recipes (showing that editors understood the growing importance of middle-class women readers) and included articles by women. Despite its name, it obviously had women among its audience. Magazines branched into more specialized readerships as the century progressed. There were magazines for ladies, with some, like *The Ladies Diary*, including quizzes, dress patterns and illustrations, while others were religious in nature.

Most contributors (who were also readers) appear to have received nothing for their pains, but were happy just to have their enigmas, riddles, short stories, information about eclipses, mathematical problems and poems printed. "It seems there was no payment for contributions to *The Lady's Magazine*. Thus it is unsurprising that these magazines made a profit. They did not even return rejected manuscripts." (Adburgham 150) Consequently, the periodicals in question were able to keep their costs and prices down. Contributors were of all sorts, men and women: one well-known regular contributor to *The Gentleman's Magazine* was Jane Hughes, who wrote under the pseudonym of "Melissa". However, many of the readers and the vast majority of the contributors and editors (though one says he was aided by his "amiable wife") are men. It is generally men who answer enigmas and puzzles, and send in letters and poems.

The presence of contributors' many references to astronomy implies that telescopes were widespread among readers, and they cannot have been cheap! It is an audience of educated and restless minds. There is a very masculine "feel" to all of the magazines, though writings are often specifically aimed at "the fair sex" a term which is widely used, and judges a woman solely on her physical image. All references to humanity are to "men" or "mankind". Women

contributed puzzles, enigmas and poems, but relatively few manage to win the prizes offered, mostly free issues of the magazine itself! However, many non-voters, especially women, still felt part of the system, due to access to the press.

2. MALE CHAUVINIST ATTITUDES TO WOMEN

Attitudes to women were not only a matter of “machismo”, but a reflection of a more general attitude to the natural order. Women, like fertile “mother nature” were expected to be passive, ornamental and productive, and to be violated, inseminated, harvested and moulded by men. Women and nature were supposed to have as their main purpose the production of children or consumer goods for men, that is, to be tamed, fertilised and tilled. Kate Soper (142) expresses the attitude of those times as follows: “Nature was a site of rebirth, settlement and taming, a violating intervention by the phallic male pioneer upon the nurturing womb.” It was an era when most people believed that inequality was inherent to human existence and was sanctioned by God – that men and then women were positioned within a “chain of being”, stretching from God himself at the top, down through the layers of society and into the animal kingdom. Thus, “The idea of natural sexual difference which extends from biological function through social roles to mental qualities... we are dealing, not with nature or actuality, but with ideology.” (Vivien Jones: 4) In the same book (57) Jones claims that all documents found from this century take male sexuality as the norm, while female sexuality is seen as deviant and aberrant and menstruation “an extraordinary discharge”, proof that the male body is ideal and that the female body fails to balance and regulate itself properly in due time and proportion.

During the eighteenth century women were confidently assigned as belonging to a group, whereas “we” men were not, being more varied and individual. Women were more generalised about. For example, *The Gentleman’s Magazine* (Jan 1731: 331-2) quotes an article from *Applebee’s Journal* on the different kinds of lovers, that is the Sensual lover, the General lover, the Platonic Lover and the Romantic lover. These are all males: the “unmarked form” is the male lover, who varies from individual to individual, while women are all the same sort of lovers, called “the fair one”, with an ornamental function.

The semi-anonymity of women is shown by the following examples. In *The Gentleman's Magazine* of January 1731 we find the following illustrative items. On p309, in the "Deaths" section, we read of that of "The Wife of Wm Price of Vaend in Flintshire", who does not even deserve to receive a name. In the "Casualties" section on the same page we hear that "Mr Shaw, a Victualler in Cheapside, overturn'd in a Chair with his Wife, who was killed." She is also unnamed. On page 310, talking of "Promotions", women are only promoted to "laundress", "mistress of the bedchamber", and "mistress to the robes of the Queen", unlike men, whose position improves considerably more.

Marriage was often no more than a business transaction, and in which woman was reduced to being a mere commodity. Sometimes the merchandising was explicit, with the woman or her family paying for an improvement in her position. In the same magazine (311) "Marriages", we find that of "Geo. Fox to Miss Harriet Benson, only daughter and heiress of Rob. Lord Bingley deceas'd, a Fortune of 100,000 *l.* a year."

Ladies rarely had anything to do with the upbringing of their children, which was in the hands of wet-nurses, who suckled them, and of governesses, tutors, and singing and dancing teachers, who educated them. Child mortality was high, and children rarely received affection. Relations of father and mother to children are largely unmentioned, though in these magazines we do see letters or poems of advice for them to be honest and upright.

3. COUNTERBALANCING "MACHISMO"

Linda Colley (276) claims that women carved out "for themselves a real if precarious place in the public sphere", though certain historians do claim that the growing industrialism of the late eighteenth century and the heavy nature of the chores on the land excluded women from work and made them more domestic slaves than before, which seems to be borne out by the disenfranchised and oppressed state of women during the whole of the nineteenth century. But, while it is true that many women were marginalised in these magazines, they were not much more so than the majority of males.

Most of the magazines read ignore the lower classes more than they do women.

Literary women were connected as a network of small communities held together by various genres within print culture, though they lacked a political voice. There were women who were prominent in the magazine publishing world, such as Mary Delarivière Manley, editor of the *Female Tatler* and *The Examiner*, and Eliza Haywood (*Female Spectator*). Some magazines targeted women, and publishing opened the door to some talented women writers and editors. Outside the world of publishing, progressive women were central to John Wilkes' movement and the struggle against slavery in the late 18th century. They bought anti-slavery brooches, fashion accessories, snuff-boxes and fire-screens. Many of these objects were aimed at women, some of whom had purchasing power and a voice of sorts.

Women in upper-class society shared many of the values of their male counterparts, with attitudes towards other races, the lower classes, revolutions, colonialism, religion, crime and punishment, and so on, being practically identical. There were also conservative women with influence. There is evidence that the "souls of women were as much possessed by military passion as those of men." (Ward: 179) *The Universal Museum* (Vol II: 52) seems to bear this out, with the inclusion of a review of a book entitled "Female Patriotism in England" by a Mrs Macaulay. British men also prided themselves on the achievements of the nation's women and believed it was one thing that set advanced, sophisticated Britain apart from more primitive countries. There is nowhere in these texts any questioning of the burgeoning British colonialism and imperialism of the time, either by men or women.

Hannah More, a supposedly "marginalised" woman, establishes a hierarchy of feelings, whereby sophisticated people like the British could feel refined emotions, while Africans couldn't. In fact it has been said that a kind of "sensitivity hierarchy" began in the eighteenth century. While the emotions of the vulgar and those of African slaves remain at the brute level of sensation, middle-class refinement is seen to bring sympathy.

Some examples of contradictory attitudes to women reflected in these magazines are the following. *The Young Gentleman's and Lady's Magazine* constantly exhorts on the convenience of giving education to both sexes. In Volume I (48) a letter from a man says girls read too many novels about love, and get only a superficial education, but on the other hand (50): "It is no to be expected that females are to be deeply skilled in criticism, in mathematics, in natural science." Their role is fixed and we are shown (69) the dire consequences of a girl's "passion", the breaking of ornaments, a vase and a mirror.

The characters, and probably the target audience, sometimes seem to live in a bubble, an upper-class world of valets and governesses we often associate with the Victorian era: "Dear mamma. I cannot learn the task my governess set me," complains one girl (69-74). But there are also enlightened opinions, campaigns against hunting (51), and conjectures about life on Jupiter (83) and other planets. *The Diarian Miscellany* is paternalistic. In Volume I, questions are addressed to a "Soft female" (65) or "Fair Ladies" (119). We do find (Volume I: 66) a mathematical question posed by a woman (Mrs Lydia Fisher), and another woman, Mrs Barbara Sidway, answers a question on mathematics, and further answers and solutions to problems are provided by women. It remains true, however, that though many questions are addressed to ladies, most of the questions and answers are by men.

Volume III of the same magazine publishes the answers to a mathematical question set by a girl aged 18. But the answerer's comment is similarly paternalistic: "... a very good age for matrimony, Miss". Prizes were won in 1715 (23) by "Miss Frances Harris, (whose performances are an honour to her sex)." Women's contributions are nearly all from unmarried women ("Miss", hardly ever "Mrs"). They seem to be lost to the world of useful knowledge after marriage.

The Diarian Miscellany from the Ladies' Diary displays the paradoxical nature of these attitudes. The author's preface is addressed to "the fair sex" but the first sentence is in praise of the Protestant queens, who could hardly be described as typical "ornamental" women. The 1706 edition begins with a history of famous heroic women all over the world, not submissive ones but

women like Boadicea, while on page 5 of the 1705 edition the author / editor, John Tipper, claims that: “The excellence of the female sex above that of men”. In a curious argument, that Woman before the Fall was superior to Man, Tipper goes on: “Now Adam signifies no more than Earth, but Eve signifies Life, as if man lived only by woman.” (15) God created, in order of nobility, first things and the beasts, then Man then lastly Woman. “God, having made woman, ended his work, having nothing else more excellent to create... he made woman out of him, perfect and entire in all her parts.” The curse God put on Eve was that she should be subject to her husband, implying that before original sin she was not subject to him.

Mary Wollstonecroft claimed that women were over-interested in trivialities because no other aim is given them in society: “All their thoughts turn on things calculated to excite emotion and feeling, when they should reason.” (Vivien Jones, 5) Enlightened thoughts also enter these magazines, as in *The Lady’s Poetical Magazine*, where a poem exhorts: “Happy were England, were each female mind,

To science more, and less to pomp, inclined.” (2)

And the same poem goes on to praise one: “Behold in her, a scientifick wife”. Science is always viewed positively in these magazines.

4. CONCLUSION

Women were put on a pedestal officially and in some of the magazines’ contributions, but often led lives of frustration, dependence and waste. The seeds of change were probably within that enlightened class of males who begged to differ, and whose contributions are quite prominent in these magazines. Like in all revolutions, it needed an alliance with at least some of this dominant class for cracks to appear in the monolithic block. These publications help us to understand the thought patterns of this powerful and sometimes advanced and enlightened ruling class in England.

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