Bluestocking Salons and the Public Sphere

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ARTICLE

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I. Women, Reason, and Publicity

Almost a decade after the publication of the English translation of Habermas' *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989) and over

thirty-five years since the book's original publication (1962), it is hardly an exaggeration to say that the work has opened new vistas onto the Enlightenment and the European eighteenth century. To be sure, details of Habermas' historiography have been questioned; but his main insight, the emergence in the eighteenth century of a distinctly new paradigm of social interaction, has continued to be useful. This paradigm of a public practicing rational-critical debate—Habermas calls it "publicity" or the "public sphere" (*Öffentlichkeit*)—was originally an ideological tool facilitating the rise and consolidation of a broad middle class in opposition to a feudal pattern of social hierarchy and state absolutism. But the classical public-sphere ideology had a component that made it, as Habermas says, "more than mere ideology": the universalistic conception of "humanity as such." [1] Such an egalitarian conception—potentially inclusive of all mankind—was implicit, Habermas believes, in the model of rational, social conversation that formed the basis of the public sphere. In other words, among authorized participants in the public conversation a bracketing of existing differences of status and a reciprocal and equal exchange were theoretically guaranteed.

But who were the "*authorized* participants" of the public sphere? Particularly with regard to women, this question of inclusivity has become an acid test for the ideal of publicity. Does the public sphere ideology in fact rise above mere ideology through its normative standards, or was the public sphere from the beginning, and essentially, exclusive of women? The present essay makes a contribution toward resolving this controversy by examining an instance where women appear to be full and active participants in the public sphere: the Bluestocking salons of later eighteenth-century London. Though this case involves a specific national context at a specific time, I believe that larger questions about the public sphere ideology are potentially answered through considering its example.

The public sphere has been criticized as being, in the words of Joan Landes, "essentially, not just contingently, masculinist." Landes' formulation, while perhaps extreme in its insistence on an essential and

not merely contingent bias against women, is by no means unique in its overall assessment of women's agency in the Enlightenment. Erica Harth also writes of women's virtual banishment from seventeenth- and eighteenth-century French intellectual life, arguing that the one site prepared for their public involvement, the salon, over time thwarted such involvement by the imposition of a hegemonic discourse of masculine reason. Kathryn Shevelow similarly points to a process of "simultaneous enfranchisement and restriction" by which English women were gradually excluded from any genuine participation in periodical print culture. Further, Vivien Jones has **[End Page 59]** stressed the prevailing gendered discourses of the eighteenth century that "restricted middle-class women to the role of domestic consumers"; and Ruth Perry observes an "insurmountable" "obstacle of gender" impeding even women of high rank of the period from access to literacy and education. [2]

The present essay seeks not singlehandedly to refute this sizable and often persuasive body of criticism so much as to present a complicating counter-example, an alternative case that supports a more positive assessment of women's intellectual, cultural, and, indeed, public agency. For, as I shall be arguing below, I find in the Bluestocking salons an institution of public dimensions, governed and in large part constituted by women, whose self-described purpose is the practice of what they call "reason" or "rational conversation." The two terms "public" and "reason" are, of course, pivotal ones around which the discussion of women's agency often turns. It will, therefore, be useful at this early stage in my argument to clarify what I mean by them.

First, it is a mistake to posit a strict mapping of the public/private distinction onto the exterior and interior, respectively, of domestic spaces. As Lawrence Klein has pointed out, "what people in the eighteenth century most often meant by 'public' was sociable as opposed to solitary (which was 'private')…. people at home, both…

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