

Church, State, and Modernization: English Literature as Gentlemanly Knowledge after 1688.

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Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture

Johns Hopkins University Press

Volume 37, 2008

pp. 167-196

10.1353/sec.0.0020

ARTICLE

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Church, State, and Modernization: English Literature as Gentlemanly Knowledge after 1688

Simon During (bio)

This paper belongs to the under-developed sub-discipline, "the historical sociology of literature," by which I mean that it considers literature as a social institution with specifiable material interests, organizational structures, and social functions rather than simply as a body of writing. But a caveat needs to be entered at once. The moment I am concerned with, the long eighteenth century, is, of course, when the term "literature" came to cover not written knowledge available to the literate in general but the kind of writing produced specifically by men and women of letters—and, in particular, imaginative writing.

From the sociological perspective, this change of "literature's" denotation is a consequence of a mutation of social function that the literary field underwent across the century.¹ To put a familiar case succinctly: literature became less centered on polite learning, including classical scholarship, and more centered on sympathetic imagination and the suspension of disbelief. At the same stroke, it also claimed a greater role in moral education. As it thereby extended its capacity for social agency and engagement, new readerships, particularly among women, were created alongside new genres and hierarchies of genres. By the time of Walter Scott's death in 1832, realist prose fiction had become dominant.² **[End Page 167]**

This restructuring of the literary world is usually understood through categories like commercialization, political liberalization, secularization, domestication, the emergence of the Habermasian public sphere, and the feminization of literary life—categories that can be grouped together under the head of "modernization."³ While the modernization model cannot be discounted (in fact the relation between liberty, commerce, and the increase of the "trade of writing" was often adduced at the time), I want to argue that that model is inadequate to describe the conditions under which the literary world underwent transformation. Indeed over the past twenty or so years a rather different account of eighteenth-century social and intellectual history has appeared in the scholarship of historians like J.C.D. Clark and J.G.A. Pocock.⁵ Here the

period is not analyzed as anticipating a modernized future but as imbricated in its pasts. In Clark's case particularly, if rather polemically, eighteenth-century England becomes a "confessional state" in which political differences remain primarily expressions of religious differences, and church/state relations are key to social, cultural, and intellectual formations.⁶ A secular polity cannot be assumed. In a similar spirit, a series of recent studies have made the case that the Anglican religion played a more significant role in public life and attracted wider support and participation than had been recognized by earlier historians, undercutting accounts which present the period as primarily governed by the modernizing forces just mentioned.⁷

These revisionist accounts, whose impulse has indubitably been conservative but whose insights need not be contained within conservatism, have only been spottily absorbed by literary historians, and when they have been so absorbed, have often lapsed into only partly persuasive arguments that particular writers were more closely connected to Jacobitism than previous scholarship had supposed.⁸ Yet they do allow us to inquire into the degree to which the transformation of literature's social function and status in England can be understood as an—admittedly highly-mediated—effect of the shift of relations between church, market, and state after 1688. More particularly they can provide the terms through which we can understand how a new literary formation came into being from within the older, only partly secularized concepts and institutional structures of polite learning. Such a revisionist account can also help us understand how older forms of literary production and knowledge responded to mutations in the literary field, whose "modernization" cannot effectively be understood macrologically as the smooth transformation from one set of structures and conditions into another but rather as the outcome of continual local frictions and exchanges between older and newer formations, both themselves under constant transformation. This essay presents itself **[End Page 168]** as an account of two moments in which newer, secular formations energetically brushed against older, non-secular ones—and vice-versa.

To this...

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SIMON DURING

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