

Dealing with the ‘Fair Sex’: Women and the Periodical Press in the Nichols Collection

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Introduction

In the aftermath of the 1688 ‘Glorious Revolution’, pamphlets debating revolution, novelty and change were numerous. Many of them raised dangerous questions which potentially challenged and threatened the existing patriarchal and religious order. Among the mooted issues were the sovereignty of the people, the right to rebel against authority and to choose the sovereign, and the sinful nature of resistance or obedience. There was therefore a need to reconcile changes and tradition and to present the new era as a period of positive and limited changes. The Revolution therefore also opened an era of moral reflection that rejected the loose and rakish morals of the Restoration regime along with the theory of the Divine Right of Monarchs. It was this conservative agenda that mostly the Whigs supported in the late seventeenth century and in the early decades of the eighteenth century, in particular by launching a new form of journal: the periodical. These periodicals, a large

number of which are included in the Nichols collection, emerged in the 1690s and reflected the new mood of the nation, blending the desire for novelty and freedom and the wish to contain it at the same time.

Unlike newspapers, periodicals did not publish the news (foreign or domestic). Instead they commented upon a broad sweep of topics ranging from politics and religion to the economic and social affairs of the realm. Journals were composed of essays, letters and all sorts of short opinion pieces. They could incorporate poetry; short pieces of fiction; musical scores; songs and charades; articles of literary criticism; essays on the consequences of the continental wars; on England’s relationship with its neighbours; on credit, charity, commerce; on the plague scare of 1720; or on fashion. Such variety enabled them both to instruct and entertain their readers. Their lengths and formats, like their schedules of publication, varied from one journal to another. Some, like Addison and Steele’s famous *Spectator*

(1711–13; 1714), were dailies, comprising a two-column essay printed on both sides of a single sheet. Others, like *The Female Tatler* (1710–11) were bi-weekly single-sheets. These were essay periodicals. Some like *The Gentleman's Journal* (1691–94) were monthly miscellanies, and took the form of a 40-page magazine composed of numerous articles.

Such questioning of male dominance in marriage was further publicised by the Jacobite movement of resistance to the new regime. Jacobite poetry of the 1690s compared Queen Mary to Tullia, Tarquin's wife, an unchaste wife and a parricide.² It thus suggested that the Revolution had been promoted by a woman who had trampled down the rules of femininity and feminine propriety. Queen Anne's reign (1701–14) naturally prolonged such anxieties. Like her sister Mary, Anne had actively rebelled against her father's authority during the Revolution. She had therefore cast away the principles of dutiful passive obedience that girls were expected to show toward paternal authority. Anne's case was accepted because she was, as the Queen, clearly an exception. Yet many felt that this exception nonetheless threatened the patriarchal order by encouraging other women to step out of their proper sphere. And indeed, beyond James II's daughters, the 1688 Revolution had been the occasion for many women to vindicate their political opinions.

Many periodical writers were quick to perceive both the good and bad points of such actions. The good news was that there was an increasing number of women who were literate, and who had leisure and money and were curious about the world around them and thus were potential customers.



Typical periodical format. *The Spectator*, 2nd April 1711.
No 28. Vol. 18B.

1688 and the Rise of Women

Several of these papers also explicitly appealed to a female readership. This trend reflected best the mixed feelings that the recent political and social developments had unleashed. In the late-Stuart era, women were still largely confined to the domestic sphere. Because of their limited education and because of prejudices, they were expected to keep away from the world of politics. But the Revolution of 1688 had dealt a serious blow to the existing patriarchal hierarchy. As the proto-feminist philosopher Mary Astell made clear, the Revolution had far-reaching consequences for women. In the preface to the third edition of *An Essay upon Marriage*, she compares the 1688 crisis with a domestic quarrel in which the people who were compared to the wife had dared to discard the king's – their husband's – authority and had thus overturned both the political and the patriarchal order. Astell then asked:

'Again, if Absolute sovereignty be not necessary in a State, how comes it to be so in a Family? ... For, if Arbitrary power is evil in itself, and an improper Method of governing Rational and free agents, it ought not to be practised any where'.¹

Less positive was that they were meddling with male issues and overstepping traditional gender boundaries. A few women dared to step into the public world of print.³ Female printers such as Anne Baldwin – who was to publish many of the Whig periodicals of the early eighteenth century – actively supported the new regime by issuing Williamite tracts. Jacobite women such as Elinore James published petitions and anti-Williamite texts. Some female writers like Sarah Fyge or the historian Elizabeth Elstob not only published their writings but also boldly dedicated them to Queen Anne, whom they compared to an Amazon, thus praising the unconventional image of the Warrior Queen.

¹ Mary Astell, *An Essay upon Marriage*, (1701), 4th edition, London, 1730 Appendix, p. 149.

² D. Christopher Gabbard, 'The She-Tyrant Reigns: Mary II and the Tullia Poems', *Restoration: Studies in English Literary Culture, 1660–1700*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (Fall 2001), pp. 103–16.

³ Paula MacDowell, *The Women of Grub Street, Press, Politics and Gender in the London Literary Marketplace 1678-1730*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1998.

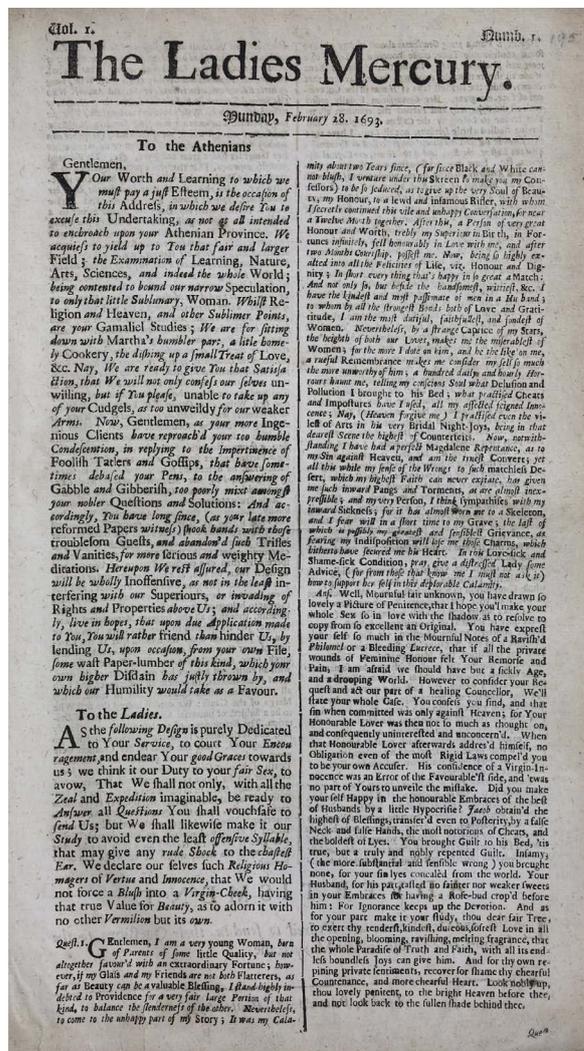
The Periodical Press Reacts: Adapting to a Female Readership

Such a discovery prompted two kinds of reaction in the periodical press. First of all, many periodical writers were eager to capitalize on the rising purchasing power and on the leisure that women from the middling ranks now enjoyed. They therefore widened their audience to a female readership which they considered as a subgroup of consumers whose interests and needs were to be taken into account and answered.⁴ One of the very first periodicals to make an explicit appeal to a female readership was John Dunton's *Athenian Mercury* (1691–97, originally started as *The Athenian Gazette*). It acknowledged that 'women were a strong party in the world' and declared its intention to devote one issue a month to 'ladies' topics'. Soon, this question-and-answer journal was to publish queries from female readers, and its fictional society of learned Athenians answered them regularly. Most later periodicals followed the same trend. Motteux's *Gentleman's Journal*, Defoe's *Review* (1704–13), *The British Apollo* (1708–10), *The Tatler*, *The Spectator*, *The Free-Thinker* (1718–21) all used this device to attract a female audience and occasionally dealt with subjects which they thought were more likely to please female readers.

That these journals were popular among women is confirmed by the fact that they were not only delivered to the coffee houses (which attracted an exclusively male readership) but also to the homes of subscribers (usually considered as the female sphere), and to booksellers where female readers could buy individual issues. Although they were printed in London, they also quickly reached a provincial readership. *The Gentleman's Journal*, for instance, had female correspondents in Chester and Oxford. It was even read in Dublin. Such best-sellers as *The Spectator* were read in all the provincial English towns, as well as in Ireland and Scotland (Glasgow notably).⁵

A few even tried to reinvent themselves as publications exclusively for a female audience. Such was the case of *The Athenian Mercury*, which published four issues entitled *The Ladies Mercury* between 28 February 1693 and 17 March 1693. Another such venture was Peter Anthony Motteux's *Gentleman's Journal*, whose 1693 October issue was renamed *The Lady's Journal*. However, both were short-lived ventures. It was not until 1727 that an Irish journal, *The Ladies Journal*, a follower of *The Gentleman's Journal*, took up the formula again, and this was only published, from Dublin, for a period of six months. In England, female readers enjoyed a few longer-lived

specialised periodicals. In 1738 the London magazine *The Lady's Curiosity or Weekly Apollo* (composed of 20 issues) was issued. This strategy was probably not very successful because readers had to wait for the novelist Eliza Haywood's monthly magazine *The Female Spectator* (1744–46) for a more solid and popular publication. This venture was subsequently imitated by Frances Brooke's *The Old Maid* (1755–56) and Charlotte Lennox's *Lady's Museum* (1760–61).



First issue of *The Ladies Mercury*, 8 February 1693.

No 1. Vol. 8A.

⁴ Kathryn Shevelov, *Women and Print Culture: The Construction of Femininity in the early Periodical*, London and New York, Routledge, 1989.

⁵ Claire Boulard Jouslin, *Presse et socialisation féminines en Angleterre de 1690 à 1750: Conversation à l'heure du thé*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2000.

The Periodical Press Reacts: Quashing Women's Aspirations

Second, as women participated in political debates and contributed to keeping passions high, several journals (largely Whig in spirit) attempted to cool down the political temperature by publicising a reformist moral agenda that would teach their readers good sense and politeness. Such an aim could be achieved by redefining femininity and the gender boundaries. Against the notion that there was no sex in the soul, an idea that a few seventeenth-century proto-feminists championed in order to claim rights and liberties for women, many periodicals argued, following Richard Steele's *Tatler*, that on the contrary 'there is a sort of sex in souls'. Thus they concluded that, since women's physiology and intellect were naturally different from those of men, their behaviour, their lives and their centres of interest had to be specific and distinct from masculine behaviour, lives and interests. Significantly, the very earliest journal to publish a specifically feminine magazine, *The Lady's Mercury*, already answered questions that all related to such topics as courtship, marital difficulties and obedience to parents in the choice of a husband.

Following in these steps, *The Tatler*, *The Spectator*, *The Freeholder*, *The Lover* (1716) and *The Free-Thinker* all spread a feminine ideal that equated femininity with such natural qualities as gentleness, grace, modesty, virtue and sentimentality. In consequence, such qualities were thought to bloom naturally in the private domestic sphere. A truly feminine audience was therefore expected to be interested in specific topics that were exalted as the prerogative of the 'Fair Sex': love, marriage, family life.

To make their point even clearer, some of the early journals presented fictitious female models who mirrored the female readers' aspirations and vices and who were gently reformed by the paper. In *The Tatler*, Richard Steele created the character of Jenny Distaff, the columnist's sister. Jenny wished to contribute to her brother's journal in his absence and claimed that, being a woman, she had the credentials to write essays addressing a female audience. Yet Jenny's writing career was short, to make sure that her taking up the pen should not be interpreted as an encouragement to disturb the gender hierarchy. She soon returned to her 'proper' world by marrying one of her brother's friends. And once married, she wrote only occasionally, to describe the delights and duties of the state of matrimony.

The Spectator was to push this programme to the full, instituting 'women's days', when papers were devoted to reforming specifically female vices that marred the ideals of womanhood. Female readers were instructed to leave off frivolous and superficial activities, such as applying make-up, which turned them into pictures ('picts') or obsessively taking care of their appearance. They were advised to turn their attention to the ornamentation of their minds and to good sense. Education was thus central to the periodical's purpose. And the periodicals' reformist agenda was considered progressive since it contrasted the shallow instruction women received through their governesses or in the boarding schools with the more profound advice provided by the journal.

Other periodicals followed *The Spectator's* path. *The Free-Thinker*, an essay periodical which was published three times a week by Whig defenders, such as Hugh Boulter and Ambrose Philips, encouraged women to ponder over such 'feminine' defects as superstition, curiosity or vanity, and to banish them with help from the mild philosophical reasoning offered by the periodical.

A Voice for Women: Letters Pages

The Free-Thinker also used another device, one deployed since the birth of the periodical press and which was to become one of its trademarks: the publication of readers' letters in correspondence pages.

Since *The Athenian Mercury* and *The Gentleman's Journal*, periodical writers had tried to widen their audience by appealing to their readers' contributions. Motteux, for instance, encouraged his readers by publishing such advertisements:

'The ingenious are desired to continue to send what ever may be properly inserted in this journal, either in verse or prose, directing it to the Publisher, or at the Latin Coffee-House, for the Author of *The Gentleman's Journal*, not forgetting to discharge the Postage.'

Among the four hundred contributions sent and published in this magazine, about 20 per cent came from female correspondents. Contributions could be mere charades, songs or poems. But in later periodicals, they also took the shape of letters, which, if they discussed topics considered compatible with the aims of the journal, were to be published in the next issue.

Letters thus enabled female readers to voice some of their concerns and to seek advice. As they were selected by the editors, they were used by them to strengthen their own domestic agenda. However, letters could also be fabricated by the writers who wished to deal with topics they thought important. *The Spectator* played with its readers by mixing genuine and forged letters by both men and women, leaving them to guess which was fiction and which was reality.

The Free-Thinker trod the same ground. It published the letters of young ladies who considered the columnist, a self-proclaimed philosopher, as their mentor and who therefore wished him to guide them in the choice of a husband. Such was the case of Miranda, to whom 'Mr Free Thinker' explained which qualities she should expect in her husband (nos 95 and 123). To Barbara Thoughtful, a servant maid who ambitioned to marry an academic and who confided to the journal her doubts about the university student who courted her, Mr Free Thinker sent this answer, to ring as a warning bell to all upstarts (no. 153):

'In all the Love-Cases, that come before me, I consider myself as the Parent or the Guardian of the Persons, who consult me. Therefore if Barbara will be ruled by a Philosopher, I advise her to moderate her ambition. . . . I do not approve of very unequal Matches'.

The letter was calculated to strike readers because it dealt with a situation that many girls must, even if only in their imaginations, commonly have encountered. The epistolary form, moreover, gave it an air of verisimilitude that facilitated the process of identification between the female readers and the ambitious girl. The letter was likely to be more piquant to the readers if it were real. If it were forged, it made entertaining reading and its moral weight was not thereby diminished. Last, Mr Freethinker's answer, by failing to condemn the young man's inconsiderate behaviour, made it clear that if the girl was duped into immorality, her naiveté and not his wickedness was to blame. The periodical's lesson was worth pondering.

Discrediting Women and Politics

However, to sever the unnatural link between women and politics, the journals went beyond merely guiding women back into domesticity. They explicitly discredited all female attempts to dabble in politics. They achieved this by laughing at women who did so. One striking and humorous instance of this is essay no. 81 of *The Spectator*. It mocks ladies' habit of

signalling their political allegiances with patches – artificial beauty spots – which they put on their faces. How unfortunate then is Rosalinda, 'A Famous Whig partizan [who] has . . . a very beautiful Mole on the Tory part of her Forehead, which, being very conspicuous, has occasioned many Mistakes'?

The periodicals also sought to show that womanhood and politics were mutually antagonistic. Female politicians were often depicted as degenerate creatures. Ladies who discussed politics lost their temper, became passionate viragos, and behaved in ways which were not only unladylike, but unfeminine and unnatural, argued Addison in *The Freeholder* no. 23 (1716). In this periodical, written to support the Hanoverian regime against the impending Jacobite invasion, Addison adroitly acknowledged a female public figure, in reply to whose opinions he addressed eight of the fifty-five papers the periodical numbered. Yet Addison judged better to silence women and to convince them that even in times of acute political crisis, ladies were expected to limit their political support to boycotting French silks. Those who did not contain themselves and, even worse, those who held opposition views and who were likely to support the Jacobites or the Tories, were slandered as prostitutes in *The Freeholder*. Significantly, unlike the other periodicals, Addison's *Freeholder* did not publish any letters from female readers. It thus in effect denied them the right to speak. Finally, for female readers who might not have grasped this message, *The Freeholder* also advocated Richard Allestree's etiquette book *The Government of the Tongue* (1674), a work that confined women's conversation to domestic and pious subjects.⁶

⁶ Claire Boulard Jouslin, 'The Paradise of fools': *The Freeholder* (1715–16) et 'l'Utopie de l'opinion publique féminine en Angleterre', *Dix-Huitième Siècle*, no. 43 (2011) 469–85.

This Petulance in Conversation is particularly observed to prevail among some of that Sex where it appears the most unbecoming and the most unnatural.

But it is generally remarked, that every one of them who is a Shrew in domestick Life, is now become a Scold in Politicks.

If there is not some Method found out for allaying these Heats and Animosities among the Fair Sex, one does not know to what Outrages they may proceed.

Women who are so liberally gifted by Nature in this Particular, ought to study with the greatest Application, the Rules of Female Oratory, delivered in that excellent Treatise, entituled *The Government of the Tongue*. Had that Author foreseen the Political Ferment which is now raised among the Sex, he would probably have made his Book larger by some Chapters than it is at present

Extracts of Addison's discourse on women in *The Freeholder*, 9th March 1716
No. 23. Vol. 28A

Conclusion: The impact of the Periodical Press on Women

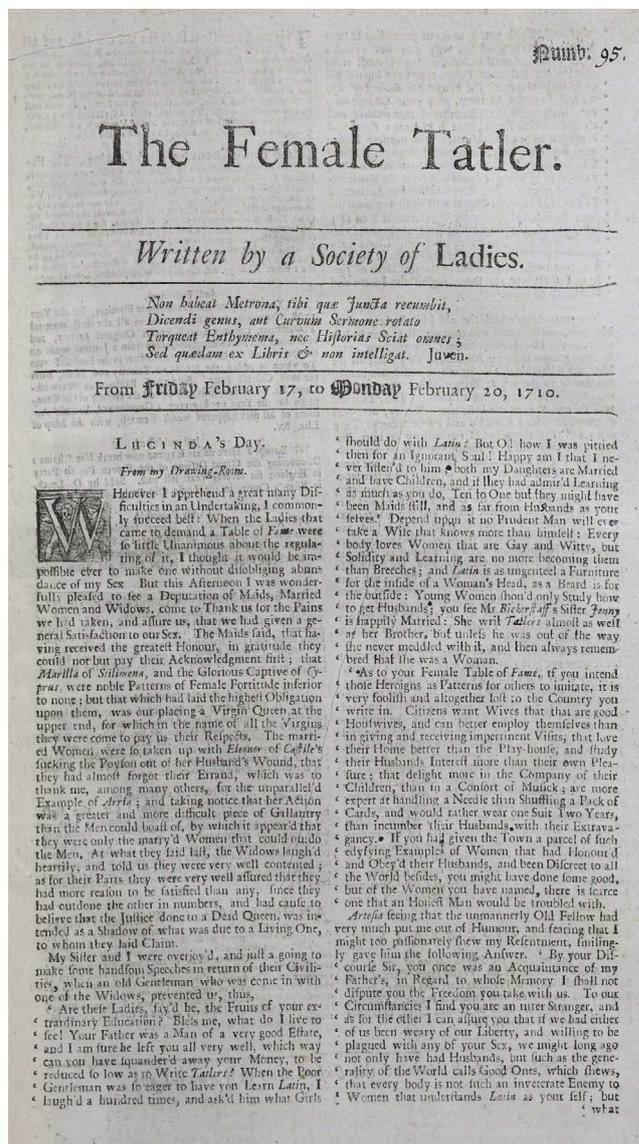
Did the periodical press succeed in silencing women?

Addison's attempt in *The Freeholder* did not pass uncriticised.

In a pamphlet supposedly written by a London prostitute, Nanny Rochester, *The Freeholder* was mockingly informed that he and the Whigs could expect the support of all the London prostitutes in their venture. To silence women completely was clearly impossible, and attempts to do so were liable to provoke ribald public responses.

Yet on the whole, rather few women, compared to the large numbers of male correspondents, seem to have contributed to journals in the early eighteenth century. Even fewer became journalists, even though the possibility was in the air. In *The Female Tatler* (1709), a biweekly which capitalised on Steele's *Tatler*, Lucinda, supposedly one of the female authors of the journal asked: 'Pray, good Sir, why may not Women write Tatlers as well as Men?' (2nd series, 17–20 Feb. 1710). Significantly, Lucinda was only a fictitious eidolon who hid the identity of Bernard Mandeville. Her proto-feminist outcry seems to suggest that womens' voices could best be heard when men spoke for them, while keeping them back within the

sphere of the salon. It is illuminating to see that when genuine female writers such as Eliza Haywood or Charlotte Lennox did publish periodicals after 1750, their ventures were specialised women's magazines, whose topics were still largely confined to the domestic sphere. Politics remained a marginal topic and was always handled under cover of fiction or with extreme caution.



The 17-20 February 1710 edition of the *Female Tatler*, in which 'Lucinda' contributed a front-page article. No 95. Vol. 16A.

List of Further Reading

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