

ROUTLEDGE REVIVALS

Women and Print Culture

The Construction of Femininity
in the Early Periodical

Kathryn Shevelov



Women and Print Culture

The Construction of Femininity
in the Early Periodical

Kathryn Shevelov



Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

First published 1989 by Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE
29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

© 1989 Kathryn Shevelow

Set in 10/12pt Baskerville Linotron 202 by
Columns Ltd, Reading.
Printed in Great Britain by
Biddles Ltd, Guildford

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilized in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Shevelow, Kathryn

Women and Print Culture: The construction of femininity in the early periodical.

1. Women's serials in English. Special themes. Women, history. Sociological perspectives
I. Title
302.2'324

ISBN 0-415-01222-8

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Shevelow, Kathryn, 1951-

Women and Print Culture: The construction of femininity in the early periodical.

Bibliography: p.
Includes index.

1. Women's periodicals, English—History—18th century. 2. Women—Great Britain—Books and reading—History—18th century. 3. English prose literature—18th century—History and criticism. 4. English prose literature—Women authors—History and criticism. 5. Women in literature. 6. Femininity (Psychology) in literature. 7. Women and literature—Great Britain.

I. Title.

PN5124.W6S5 1989 305.4 88-26370

ISBN 0-415-01222-8

Women and Print Culture

With the growth of popular literary forms, particularly the periodical, during the eighteenth century, women began to assume an unprecedented place in print culture as readers and writers. Yet, at the same time, the very textual practices of that culture inscribed women within an increasingly restrictive and oppressive set of representations. First published in 1989, this title examines the emergence and dramatic growth of periodical literature, showing how the journals solicited women as subscribers and contributors, whilst also attempting to regulate their conduct through the promotion of exemplary feminine types. By enclosing its female readership within a discourse that defined women in terms of love, matrimony, the family, and the home, the English periodical became one of the main linguistic sites for the construction of the eighteenth-century ideology of domestic womanhood.

Based on the close scrutiny of the popular periodical press between 1690 and 1760, this study will be of particular value to any student of the relationship between women and print culture, the development of women's magazines, and the study of literary audiences.

First published in 1989
by Routledge

This edition first published in 2014 by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN
and by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

© 1989 Kathryn Shevelow

The right of Kathryn Shevelow to be identified as author of this work has been asserted by her in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

Publisher's Note

The publisher has gone to great lengths to ensure the quality of this reprint but points out that some imperfections in the original copies may be apparent.

Disclaimer

The publisher has made every effort to trace copyright holders and welcomes correspondence from those they have been unable to contact.

A Library of Congress record exists under LC control number: 88026370

ISBN 13: 978-1-138-80419-7 (hbk)

ISBN 13: 978-1-315-75317-1 (ebk)

WOMEN AND PRINT CULTURE

*The construction of femininity in the early
periodical*

KATHRYN SHEVELOW

R

ROUTLEDGE

London and New York

For Ed

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many people have helped me to write this book. First and foremost, I wish to thank the members of my writing group, who have fortified me throughout with advice, criticism, support, and friendship: Page DuBois, Stephanie Jed, Susan Kirkpatrick, Lori Chamberlain, Lisa Lowe, and Julie Hemker.

Other friends and colleagues gave me important help: Andrew Wright and Edwin Fussell, both of whom carefully read the entire manuscript, were particularly generous with their assistance and encouragement; Nancy Armstrong, Jon Klancher, Fred Randel, and the late Robert C. Elliott all gave me the benefit of their attention and advice.

I would like to thank the Affirmative Action Committee and the Committee on Research of the Academic Senate, the University of California at San Diego, for supporting my research and writing with grants and travel awards; and, in particular, I want to acknowledge the contribution of many of my colleagues and students in the Department of Literature towards maintaining its stimulating, diverse, and supportive intellectual environment. I also want to thank the staff of the University of California at San Diego Department of Literature for invaluable assistance on many occasions; the University of California at Los Angeles for a Clark Library fellowship; the staffs of the University of California at San Diego Library, the Clark Library, the Huntington Library, the British Library, and the Bodleian Library for their assistance over several years. The Huntington Library has graciously extended permission to reproduce the illustrations used on the cover and discussed within the text. I am most grateful to Avril and John Marcus for providing me with a home in London on so many

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

occasions, and to Janice Price of Routledge for her advice and encouragement. My stepdaughter Susanna Lee contributed considerable energy and enthusiasm.

Finally, I want to extend special thanks to my companion Edward Lee, whose love and support, both editorial and domestic, sustained me in the writing of this book.

La Jolla, California
August 1988

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	ix
1 'Fair-sexing it': an introduction to periodical literature and the eighteenth-century construction of femininity	1
<i>The problems of ideology and the middle class</i>	6
<i>Thinking about women in the eighteenth century</i>	10
<i>The periodical and the 'rise of the novel'</i>	18
2 Early periodicals and their readers	22
<i>The establishment of the periodical press</i>	24
<i>The reconstitution of the reader</i>	27
<i>Literacy and the practice of reading</i>	29
<i>The reformist agenda and the woman reader</i>	32
<i>Audience complicity in the early periodical</i>	37
<i>The community of the text</i>	43
<i>The periodical and the representation of the woman reader</i>	49
3 Readers as writers: the female subject in the <i>Athenian Mercury</i>	58
<i>Audience-building in the Athenian Mercury</i>	61
<i>Correspondence and narratives</i>	66
<i>Anonymity and self-revelation</i>	71
<i>Epistolary parody: the London Mercury</i>	74
<i>Epistolarity and authority</i>	78
<i>Athenian iconography</i>	82
<i>The intervention of the text into private life</i>	86
<i>Reading the Athenian Mercury</i>	89

CONTENTS

4	‘A sort of sex in souls’: the <i>Tatler</i> and the <i>Spectator</i>	93
	Correspondence and audience-building: Women as letter-writers in the <i>Tatler</i> and the <i>Spectator</i>	101
	<i>The structural function of letters in the Tatler</i>	101
	<i>Women as correspondents of the Tatler</i>	107
	<i>Letters in the Spectator</i>	113
	The life and fortunes of Jenny Distaff	116
	<i>Jenny as writing subject</i>	119
	<i>Educating Jenny</i>	124
	The figure of domestic womanhood from the <i>Tatler</i> to the <i>Spectator</i>	129
	<i>Supplementing Jenny Distaff: the further configuration of the domestic woman in the Tatler</i>	130
	<i>The Spectator</i>	132
	Sentimentality and didacticism	140
5	Gender specialization and the feminine curriculum: the periodical for women	146
	<i>Women as readers and readers as women: the specialization of the women’s periodical</i>	149
	<i>The gallantry of a philosopher: the Free-Thinker</i>	153
	<i>Defining the territory of the women’s periodical: the Visiter</i>	159
	<i>Feminine authority and the essay-periodical: the Female Spectator</i>	167
	<i>The periodical as syllabus: the early women’s magazines</i>	174
	<i>The Lady’s Museum and the feminine curriculum</i>	180
	<i>Later magazines and the instruction in femininity</i>	186
	Afterword	191
	Notes	199
	Works cited	223
	Index	231

‘Fair-sexing it’: an introduction to periodical literature and the eighteenth-century construction of femininity

I'll not meddle with the Spectator – let him fair-sex it to the world's end.
(Jonathan Swift, *Journal to Stella*)

During the eighteenth century, as upper- and middle-class Englishwomen increasingly began to participate in the public realm of print culture, the representational practices of that culture were steadily enclosing them within the private sphere of the home. That is, at the same historical moment that women were, to a degree unprecedented in western Europe, becoming visible as readers and writers, the literary representation of women – whether as members of an intended audience, as writing subjects, or as textual objects – was producing an increasingly narrow and restrictive model of femininity. These simultaneous and inter-related processes may seem to constitute a paradox, but they are only contradictory if we insist upon equating access to the mechanisms of print exclusively with metaphors of enfranchisement and inclusion rather than those of restriction and containment. In fact, the access that literate women gained to the print culture developing in eighteenth-century England had mixed consequences for their representation in and by writing. For many of the very agents that were enabling, even actively promoting, women's participation in print culture were also those engaged in containing it.

The growth of popular literary forms such as the periodical played a key role in this simultaneous process of inclusion and restriction. The periodicals' characteristic attention to women and 'women's concerns' (the editorial policy that Swift sneeringly labeled 'fair-sexing it') served an emerging ideology that, in the act

of making claims for women's capabilities and social importance, constructed women as essentially – that is, both biologically and socially – 'other' than men. Although many of the features of this construction, such as the particular associations of women with love and romance, matrimony, children, and the household, were by no means new in the eighteenth century, their representation in popular literature contributed powerfully to a developing discourse surrounding women that was reformulating sexual relations and the family based upon new criteria.

My purpose in this book is to delineate the process of simultaneous enfranchisement and restriction that marked women's visible entrance into print culture by tracing the early stages of the development of the popular periodical, as it emerged in the late seventeenth century. By 'popular' I mean to indicate the relative breadth or inclusiveness of the early periodical's intended audience rather than its position on a hierarchical scale: I use the term to signify a general publication intended to interest an audience relatively heterogeneous in regard to social class and educational status, and to this end I want to differentiate my use throughout this book of the term 'popular' to describe certain types of periodicals from other connotations connected with 'popular' (as opposed to 'elite') culture. Though such an opposition between popular and elite does play a part in the early periodicals' projection of an audience, the terms themselves are indeterminate, not only because they were undergoing transformations in eighteenth-century Europe, but also because they are open to a variety of competing constructions. Some analyses would categorize the audience of the popular periodical as belonging by orientation if not class to a new literate, enlightened 'elite' evolving in the eighteenth century.¹ Indeed, the periodicals often acted as agents for the transmission of 'genteel' codes of conduct, thus aligning themselves with values explicitly associated with the upper classes. Yet they addressed readers represented as being in need of such instruction in manners. In fact, though literate and often upwardly mobile, a good segment of the intended audience for the popular periodicals, and indeed some of their editors, were and perceived themselves to be marginal to many of the practices of upper-class culture (which they tended to construct as more monolithic than it was); they did not view themselves as participating in its forms of social and political power, its

educational institutions, and its classically-based literary traditions. In this book, the notion of the elite will signify this dominant upper-class culture. Though elite readers were indeed part of the popular periodical's audience, for the most part the periodical either sought to appeal to, or directly solicited, readers perceived as marginal to this dominant group.

The popular periodical was initially directed at a readership which included a mixture of classes and both sexes. It became instrumental in forming a female reading audience organized around the literary representation of women as readers, writing subjects, and textual figures situated within a reformist discourse designed to instruct and entertain. Through its topicality and appearance of direct engagement with its readers' lives, the popular periodical attempted to exert influence as a purveyor of values. As one recent study of the periodical argues, it 'provided implicitly normative accounts of social structure and behavior' (Botein, Censer, and Ritvo 468). In regard to the representation of women, the periodical, as it developed throughout the eighteenth century, played a decidedly normative role. For it was in the periodical that one particular formulation of femininity most persistently manifested itself on the popular level: the notion of women as different in kind rather than degree from men, possessing in the household a 'separate but equal' area of activity and authority. Thus as the popular periodical developed as a genre, it was instrumental in articulating and refining a conception of gender relations gaining currency in the eighteenth century. The early periodical was one of the principal linguistic sites for the production of a new ideology of femininity and the family.

The ideological orientation of the popular periodical can be traced most immediately to the self-consciously 'progressive' attitude to 'the fair sex' shared by the earliest producers of that literature – such men as John Dunton, Peter Motteux, Daniel Defoe, Richard Steele, and Joseph Addison. In the periodicals they edited between 1691 and 1713, they issued numerous invitations to women to read, to write for, and to correspond with, the periodical; they declared the 'equality' of women to men; they crusaded with varying degrees of intensity for improvements in women's education, coupling them with sometimes more vigorous crusades for improvements in women's behavior; they proclaimed their intention to use their periodicals to defend and serve women; and they

variously represented women, as readers, as writers, as correspondents, and as illustrative figures, in their periodical texts. Granted, these author–editors differed somewhat in their attitudes toward women, as Rae Blanchard's classic article on Richard Steele points out.² Still, their periodicals shared the considerable common ground of popularity in which, as I shall argue in chapter 2, the address to women was a decisive factor.

Under the mantle of a progressive orientation towards women lay a range of motivations and goals. For our purposes, they are most revealingly arranged along a continuum of reformist intentions. The early popular periodicals' reformist agendas tended to collect around the interrelated purposes of 'learning' (the periodical as an informational tool in itself, as well as a force exhorting women to gain knowledge) and the modification of behavior (the periodical as social critic and conduct book, exposing vice and modeling virtue). These reformist agendas coexisted within the same periodical – indeed, they were inseparable – but in the space of twenty years between the major periodicals of Dunton and Steele, the emphasis shifted from reform-as-knowledge to reform-as-behavior-modification. (Later periodicals, particularly the magazines specifically designed for women which appeared in mid-century, returned to and greatly expanded the instructional agenda, as chapter 5 will show, but in a way that revealed that the conflation of knowledge *with* behavior modification, always implicit in the popular periodical, had become explicit.) The shift from Dunton to Steele involved a change in both the frequency and the type of representation of women; the amount of printed space occupied by women increased, offering a more extensive elaboration of a category of representation labeled 'feminine,' a category formulated in the periodicals of Dunton but greatly refined in those of Steele.

The periodical was a public disseminator of prescriptions for private behavior: it constructed, for public consumption, normative images of 'private life' closely identified with women. In this way, the popular periodical, as it established itself throughout the eighteenth century, became a primary locus of the 'feminization of discourse,' Terry Eagleton's term for that contradictory process by which 'feminine values,' increasingly assigned to the private realm, were emerging as influences upon public culture.³ The popular periodicals validated certain types of feminine experience, insisted

upon the significance of certain feminine concerns as literary material and social agenda, and asserted women's intellectual capabilities and potential equality. Their program of bringing women into literary culture tended from the beginning towards an overdetermination of one feminine figure: the domestic woman, constructed in a relation of difference to man, a difference of kind rather than degree. This figure was a highly idealized construction of femininity, one situated within a long tradition of the literary representation of women, but here newly formulated in such a way as to involve the woman both as reader and as writer, as subject as well as object, in the service of an as yet unestablished but coalescing ideology.

In investigating the formation of this overdetermined phenomenon, the construction of the domestic woman in and by print, this book will focus predominantly on the early developmental stages of the popular periodical, tracing a trajectory of representation from early formulations of this figure to its remarkably rapid formalization. Most of the book will concentrate on the first two decades of periodical publication, 1691–1712, with particular emphasis upon John Dunton's *Athenian Mercury*, the first major popular periodical, and Richard Steele and Joseph Addison's *Tatler*, which in many senses defined the genre, particularly in relation to its representations of women. In the rest of this introductory first chapter, I shall discuss the class context of the early periodical, sketch out some of the main themes of eighteenth-century thinking about women, and situate the book in relation to other accounts of women, representation, readers, and the study of the eighteenth century. In chapter 2 I shall give an account of the birth of the popular periodical press, its sphere of influence, its audience-building strategies, its means of production and distribution, and its ideological orientation. Chapter 3 will look closely at the *Athenian Mercury*, whose social agenda and epistolary format made writers out of readers in a regulatory context, with important consequences for the production of the feminine writing subject throughout the eighteenth century. Chapter 4 will focus on the influential essay-periodicals, the *Tatler* and (to a lesser degree) the *Spectator*, both of which manipulated the developing conventions of the popular periodical, most particularly its mission as a regulator of readers'

lives, in order to promulgate an increasingly prescriptive figure of the sentimental family⁴ whose center was the woman. Chapter 5 will trace out the legacy of the earliest periodicals by looking at several publications that emerged between the 1720s and the 1760s. As the periodical developed it specialized according to gender, a process that began in the 1720s and accelerated in mid-century with the creation of the women’s magazine and the introduction of women as periodical editors. Throughout all of these chapters, I shall be tracing the representation of women in the periodical as indicative of the complementary processes of inclusion and containment that governed their entrance into print culture. The periodical played a key role in expanding women’s participation as readers, as writers, and as textual figures; and in so doing, the periodical was simultaneously a principal site of the normative construction of femininity in writing.

THE PROBLEMS OF IDEOLOGY AND THE MIDDLE CLASS

The term ‘ideology’ suggests a body of coherent or cohering interests that the ideology serves, but these interests are particularly difficult to define at a time of historical shifts in ideologies. The representation of women in the popular periodical can be directly implicated in the normatizing of one construction of femininity, but it is a simpler matter to identify the process as ideological than it is to pin down the interests represented by the ideology, or even to fix upon an accurate, historically specific, descriptive category in which to contain them. If we assume that ‘ideology works to appear as a natural, unprejudiced truth . . . while it actually constitutes a motivated, class-oriented rationalization’ (L. Davis 220–1),⁵ and that it ‘*both epitomizes and itself influences broader social relations of power*’ (Sedgwick 13), we face the problem of characterizing ideological orientation in an historically precise way. And if we assume that ‘Ideology is *inscribed* in discourse in the sense that it is literally written or spoken *in it* . . . [it is] a way of thinking, speaking, experiencing’ (Belsey 5),⁶ we need to situate a given discourse complex historically as well. We shall find the process of representing women in the early eighteenth-century periodical to be an increasingly normative one, constructing a feminine area of influence, authority, and experience – the home –