

CULTURAL PERCEPTIONS OF WOMEN'S SOCIAL ROLES IN 18TH CENTURY ENGLISH PERIODICAL PUBLICATIONS

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In the past, the patriarchal society defined gender roles and behaviour and claimed that men were destined for the public life and women for the private sphere. This position of women remained unchanged for centuries and was the subject of considerable interest in the 18th century but also in the Victorian period and even today. This paper will focus particularly on the representations of women in several important 18th century English periodicals. With this in mind, it will explore and study the construction of women's roles in some articles which appeared in *New Universal Magazine, or, Miscellany of Historical, Philosophical, Political and Polite Literature*, *The Town and Country Magazine, or, Universal Repository of Knowledge, Instruction, and Entertainment*, *The New London Magazine* and *The Literary Magazine and British Review*.

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The construction of women's identities, images and roles has been a pervasive theme in the media, cinema, and literature. In the past, female representations and expressions were also topics of discussion which attracted a great deal of interest and attention. They were studied in literary and popular magazines as well as in academic and scientific publications. In 18th century Britain, an important number of literary works focused on the familial and social status of women as well as on their role in society and often reflected the cultural assumptions and attitudes towards women. The British periodical press contributed to ensure the participation of women both as writers and readers in a male-dominated society. Yet, there were also articles in these publications which placed particular emphasis on the circulation of cultural images of women and which penetrated public perception and consciousness. They not only located women's inequality in the context of a patriarchal gender order but also provided cultural representations of the female character and body from a range of geographical areas. In fact, it can be easily argued that these writings contributed to the creation of social complexities and realities by showing diverse cultural backgrounds with different ways of expression, values, and lifestyles.

18th century British periodical publications offered their readers models of female identity, behaviour, and social relationships from given social, cultural and historical contexts. The following periodicals are good examples of this trend: *New Universal Magazine, or, Miscellany of Historical, Philosophical, Political and Polite Literature* (1747-1815), *The Town and Country Magazine, or, Universal Repository of Knowledge, Instruction, and Entertainment* (1769-96), *The New London Magazine* (1785-1793), and *The Literary Magazine and British Review* (1788-94). These publications were chosen for this study on the basis of their descriptions of different forms of patriarchy and on their exploration of the cultural position of women taking into consideration both established traditions and social practice in different countries. Evidence for this was

found in some works that did not favour women's advancement in spheres of public life. Among them are "Character of the Spanish Ladies, with some Account of the Spanish Diversions" (*The Literary Magazine and British Review* 1789), "Cursory Reflections on Dress, and Particularly with Regard to Women" (*The Town and Country Magazine* 1774), and "A Description of the Ladies of England" (*New Universal Magazine* 1772).¹ These articles will be analysed in this study in order to provide an insight into some cultural factors which influenced women in the eighteenth century.

It should be noted that a high proportion of these writings are anonymous, which ensured protection of identity (Shevelow 1989: 71). Attention should be also drawn to the fact that the terms "women" and "lady", key markers of identity and difference, are contained in the titles of these articles. These significant references to women's behaviour, conduct, and dress suggest that periodicals were also directed to a female audience, although this inclusion was not specifically reflected in the title of these publications. Female representations in print reveal cultural participation of women even in the context of gender inequality and emphasize the implications and significance of gender in the formation of identities.

Women's status, roles, and position in society were read in these articles as cultural products. Their social circumstances, life patterns and attitudes together with their physical beauty and attractiveness were portrayed through the perception of cultural influences, values and traditions. In fact, "the popular periodical was a particularly active and influential agent of cultural transmission" (Shevelow 1989: 48). Discourses on femininity in terms of social circumstances and experiences helped to construct cultural markers of women specific to place and country of origin. In all probability, these current representations of women in periodicals had a social effect. Indeed, they suggest the construction of both a collective conception of female identity values and a collective meaning of women. In Margaret Beetham's words "[t]he magazine as 'text' interacts with the culture which produced it and which produces it. It is a place where meanings are contested and made" (1996: 5).

The perception of women offered by these articles is based primarily on cultural heritage and social relationships, and takes form within a patriarchal model. Men were likely to think of women as ornaments that existed for their own comfort and pleasure. Key indicators of the reification of women in the periodical press can be observed in their identification as material objects and, therefore, as not real people. This is illustrated in the article "Comparative View of Asiatic and European Ladies" which indicates that "Indian women have a warmth of constitution, which renders them incapable of the virtue of continence. But I cannot believe that women, whose spirits are dissipated by continual and excessive perspiration, are the proper objects of such an accusation" (Anon. 1790: 218).

Possible consequences of these patriarchal attitudes towards women in print culture were the penetration of these images in the cultural and social world, with the subsequent subordination of women. As Kathryn Shevelow states, "[i]n the periodical, textual representations of women were constructed not only as a means of defining and developing an audience, but also, more broadly, as signs conveying cultural values" (1989: 23). In addition, these manifestations of women can be considered as a reflection of extra-textual reality. On this basis, it can be assumed that the existence of discrimination and prejudice in society led to the construction of women's images not only as beautiful ornaments but also as sexual objects. This is exemplified in "Character of the Spanish Ladies, with Some Account of the Spanish Diversions". Its author stated that in the *seguidilla*, a Spanish dance, "a Spanish lady, dressed according to her fashion, accompanying the instruments with castanets, and beating time with her heel

with remarkable precision, becomes one of the most seducing objects that love can employ to extend his empire" (1789: 347).

This evidence makes it clear that women appear to serve as aesthetic objects for men rather than as intellectual citizens. Certainly, they were not considered equal to men particularly in regards to their nature, which was understood as innately inferior to men's. Gender prejudices inherent in the patriarchal society contributed to this distorted and dangerous reality. Women did not have equality in legal, political and public aspects. The authoritarian patriarchal morality denied them a voice in male dominated areas and restricted their influence mainly to the private sphere of the household. This unequal status favoured gender discrimination with respect to education and learning. Alice Browne maintains that "[t]he moral purpose of a woman's education was always more important than her intellectual development" (1987: 42).

In the year 1790, *The Town and Country Magazine* reported that women grew up to be wives and mothers, and to take proper care of their homes. This statement, which clearly undermined their position in society, is confirmed in the article entitled "Comparative View of Asiatic and European Ladies". The following fragment extracted from it describes the Indian patriarchal model with regard to the role of women in society as follows: "The Hindoo religion puts no restraint on the passions. The women are brought up in the notion, that they are born for no other purpose than to become mothers, and they are esteemed in proportion to the number of citizens they produce" (Anon. 1790: 217). Similarly, these predominant cultural practices were also shared by European women, who also lived in a patriarchal society in which they did not play a role equal to that of men and, "who often, for the sake of fortune, without any consideration for the duties which the state imposes, engage in matrimony" (Anon. 1790: 218). What is interesting about this quotation is the declaration that the choice to get married and start a family was made without taking into account the marital and maternal role that the patriarchal system had dictated to women. From this, it can be argued that the images of European women as domestic figures appear to be constructed in terms of cultural supremacy.

Likewise, male restrictions on female conduct and role were also experienced by English women. In the article "A Description of the Ladies of England", it is made evident that women's duties as carers, mothers and wives were based largely on their similitude to the English nation, which "attaches them to their husbands, to their children, and the care of their houses" (1772: 234), rather than on their imposed obligations to the family. Once again, women's moral duties were approached from the point of view of cultural prestige. Along with national identity, this representation of English women brings to mind the concept of "Angel in the House", which refers to the ideal domestic woman who is selflessly devoted to the private sphere of domestic life. In *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), Gilbert and Gubar emphasise on the need that a woman has to kill "the extreme images of 'angel' and 'monster' which male authors have generated for her" (1979: 17), as they are patriarchal constructs that do not represent women fairly.

In the 18th century, women were given the role of the domestic angel, that of the good wife and good mother. Indeed, images of domestic femininity were quite influential in periodicals, as can be seen in the following information on Greek women, published in *New Universal Magazine*: "The Greek women are closely confined to their houses, and are very little seen. They do not even appear at church till after marriage. Embroidery is their constant employment. This art is very ancient in Greece, and it is there carried to the highest perfection" (1772: 44). These data reveal that women were

imposed a correct and strict moral code through the teachings of patriarchal conceptions of gender, family and womanhood.

There is also evidence that male authoritative discourse also drew attention to women's fashion and accessories as aesthetic values were also transmitted through these publications. This can be seen in the article "On the Revolutions of the French Fashions, with some Advice to the Ladies Respecting Certain Parts of Dress". The author grounded the discourse on good taste and moral attitude, and placed severe restrictions on women's dress and behaviour when establishing that

[w]hen by some lucky chance, a woman has attained almost to perfection in the art of dressing; that is to say, in the art of knowing what best becomes her, she ought to be very nice in her choice of new fashions. In an age so frivolous as the present, the loss of a lover may be the consequence of even such a trifling circumstance as that of the hat being wrong placed, or turned too much to the right or the left. When a passion is founded only upon trifles, ought we to be surprised that a trifle should destroy it? (Anon. 1789: 365)

The implication here is that, although women supposedly had the freedom of clothing, an incorrect dressing choice or even a wrong tilt of the hat could have negative social consequences for them in the marriage market. Moreover, women were criticised in the periodical press for their "ignorance in an art so extensive and important as that of dress; in the art of adapting ornament to dress, and both to the shape, features, complexion, age, and the different hours of the morning or evening" (Dupaty 1789: 14). This was the case of Italian women. Similarly, French fashion was considered of poor value. The author of "A Description of the Ladies of England" asserted that: "At the trial of Lord Byron, I saw only a few Ladies dressed in the French taste. All the rest decked in the finest manner, with brocades, diamonds, and lace, had no other head dress but a ribband tied to their hair, over which they wore a flat hat, adorned with a variety of ornaments" (1772: 235). Women were also criticised for their taste for finery and taste clothes, which was disapproved and compared with vanity: "The love of finery is so thoroughly ingrained in some women, that it would be as easy to hush the winds as craze this vanity from their inclinations: it is the original sin which many of the sex bring into the world from their birth." (Meldrum 1774: 582)

The information in these articles clearly indicates that women's fashion was restrictive and constituted a typical feature of patriarchal control. Women's clothes, hats and dress sizes were used to shape women's behaviour and address women's conduct. In 1790, the anonymous writer of "Sketch of the Character of the Spanish Woman" informed that "[t]he length of their petticoat is less an effect of coquetry than of decency" (471). This statement suggests not only that Spanish women dressed according to the moral standards of discretion and modesty but also that men lasciviousness was hidden and women were to blame. In this light, it becomes obvious that female qualities were constructed in terms of patriarchal norms. Women were expected to exercise discretion and high morals, and to take responsibility for their own chastity. As Alice Browne has pointed out, "[w]riters in the latter part of the century ... lecture young women on the importance of making their status clear by modest dress and behaviour" (1987: 142). Indeed, the following extract from the article "On the Revolutions of the French Fashions, with some Advice to the Ladies Respecting Certain Parts of Dress" serves to illustrate that women were advised to dress decently: "but a proper medium ought to be observed between dresses which are too clumsy, and those which, on account of their thinness, might give offence to decency. A woman who

exposes herself to these inconveniences, does not understand her own interest.” (Anon. 1789: 364)

Given this evidence, it can be concluded that 18th century English periodical publications included topics addressed to women related to fashion and dress codes, which show a lack of intellectual exploration and stimulation. The inclusion of this type of content in print culture reinforces the idea that women's attitudes regarding moral conduct were conditioned by a patriarchal society. The female representations constructed in these publications, which reflect different social and cultural contexts and realities, emphasize the domestic role of women at that time. The images of women presented in this study confirm their exclusion from certain public spaces and activities, and that periodicals' influence on women was strong. In this sense, it can be said that the periodical press was used as a tool to express a system of patriarchal principles and to develop women's moral values and cultural habits.

Notes

1. It should be taken into account that periodicals were sometimes published under different titles over the years. Such was the case of *New Universal Magazine, or, Miscellany of Historical, Philosophical, Political and Polite Literature*. The previous titles of this publication were *Universal Magazine of Knowledge and Pleasure* (1747-1803) and *Universal Magazine* (1804-1814).

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