

THE RECEPTION OF MONTAGU'S AND BARBAULD'S WORKS IN *THE WESTMINSTER MAGAZINE*¹

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Abstract: Eighteenth-century women took an active role in the field of British cultural production. At that time, periodicals were of value in providing information about literary figures and their works. This paper examines the representation of Elizabeth Montagu and Anna Letitia Barbauld in *The Westminster Magazine*. The main emphasis is on how these female authors were perceived and presented to the public and on how their contribution to the literary sphere was covered in the magazine. A further aim of the study is to establish the importance of periodical publications as a powerful influence on reader's opinions and perceptions.

Key words: Great Britain, eighteenth century, periodical publications, gender studies.

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Resumen: Las mujeres del siglo XVIII desempeñaron un papel activo en la producción cultural británica. En aquel momento, algunas publicaciones periódicas eran de gran valor, especialmente a la hora de proporcionar información sobre autores y sus obras. Este documento examina la representación de Elizabeth Montagu y de Anna Letitia Barbauld en *The Westminster Magazine*. El énfasis principal recae en cómo se percibieron y presentaron al público estas dos autoras y en cómo se dio cobertura a su contribución al ámbito literario. Además, se hace hincapié en la influencia de este tipo de publicaciones en las opiniones y percepciones del lector.

Palabras clave: Gran Bretaña, siglo dieciocho, publicaciones periódicas, estudios de género.

In the eighteenth century, the British press was an important medium of mass communication. It attracted many readers who had immediate access to a wealth of knowledge and experience through its content. According to John Feather, at that time “[...], the printing house was outstandingly significant as a place of cultural and literary transmission” (1997: 51). As sources of a wide variety of information, periodical publications were addressed to a diversified audience which highlights “their determination to serve all markets” (Black 2001: 52). They were available at coffee-houses, which “were one of the most characteristic social institutions of eighteenth-century London, and have long been associated with the city's intellectual culture” (Ellis

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2009: 3). Coffee-houses were open to anyone who paid a penny (Ellis 1956: 45). This facilitated a redistribution of the printed content from the cultural, political and religious elite to a broader segment of the population. Access to varied topics permitted the general public to construct arguments and make informed and evaluative judgements on a broad range of discussion topics. This wide availability of the papers favoured debate and critical conversation which, undoubtedly, fostered social development together with cultural awareness and understanding.

Political news, international affairs, conflict and war dominated the English press in the eighteenth century (Black 1987: 26). There were, however, non-political items which focused on economic matters such as shipping news, commerce, trade, and grain prices. Space was also devoted to crime as “[a]ccounts of the actions of criminals not only seemed to excite readers, but also provided warning to people fearful of attack, while those who might break the law, either deliberately or inadvertently, could be warned of the consequences” (Black 2001: 54). Sports and other instructive material which included topics related to science, health and social matters were also published in the papers. Interestingly enough, periodicals were of value in providing information about literary issues, which can be regarded as a positive contribution to cultural learning. *The British Magazine; or, Monthly Repository for Gentlemen and Ladies* (1760-1767) showed great interest in literary issues. *The Rambler*, a periodical founded by Samuel Johnson (1709-1784) in 1750, and *The Covent Garden Journal* (1752), whose editor was the English novelist and dramatist Henry Fielding (1707-1754),³ also devoted space to subjects related to literature.⁴

Essays, poems, fictitious and genuine letters as well as serialised fiction and “other matter intended to divert or enlighten” (Wiles 1965: 306) attracted considerable press coverage in British publications. The serialisation of eighteenth century literature, especially prose fiction, can be seen in *The London Post*, which printed Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* in 1722 and 1723 (Black 2001: 53), or in *The British Magazine*, which

³ He wrote “under the pseudonym of *Sir Alexander Drawcansir, Kt., Censor of Great Britain*” (Marr 1971: 113).

⁴ A list of the periodical publications mentioned in this work can be found in the appendix at the end of the document.

published the novel *The Adventures of Sir Launcelot Greaves* by Tobias George Smollett (1721-1771) during 1760 and 1761. Like other major literary figures of the time, Defoe (ca. 1660-1731) and Smollett wrote for the press, helping to determine its nature and character. In 1704, Defoe had founded his journal *The Review* in which he “provided commentary on the events of the day”, especially to the urban middle class in London, to whom it was designed to appeal (Hannis 2007: 15). Smollett was also editor of *The British Magazine* and of *The Critical Review*.

In addition, the press offered readers book reviews which evaluated and described literary works. Periodicals such as *The Monthly Review* (1749-1844), *The Critical Review* (1756-1817), *The London Review of English and Foreign Literature* (1776-1780), *The Literary Magazine and British Review* (1788-1794) and *The Analytical Review* (1788-1799) gave coverage to critical evaluations of publications written both by male and female authors. Their commitment to literary studies had a significant effect on women's literature as their works attracted a good deal of attention. Interestingly enough, and despite the fact that women were still positioned as mothers and wives, they were not only perceived as being exclusively confined to the domestic realm. Their descriptions as actively building their lives and careers elevated them to more visible positions than their traditional roles in the family. Therefore, periodical sources helped to create a clearer picture of women's participation in the literary public sphere and to show that they managed to express their concerns and views on topics that affected them. By way of example, it is worth noting that, in 1792, *The Literary Magazine and British Review* (8, February 1792: 133-139) and *The Critical Review* (4, April 1792: 389-398; 5, June 1792: 132-141) provided an analysis of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects* (1792) by Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797).

The vital role played by women in society, and specifically in the newspaper press, is also evidenced in their involvement as reviewers and editors. This is particularly evident in Mary Wollstonecraft, who wrote reviews for *The Analytical Review*, and in Charlotte Lennox (ca.1730-1804), who edited *The Lady's Museum* (1760-1761). As a matter of fact, their relevance in the culture of print is also reflected in their classification as readers. At the beginning of the century, Richard Steele (1672-1729), founder of *The*

Tatler (1709-1711), launched the first number of this publication “for a readership he defined as ‘publick spirited men’ and ‘the Fair Sex, [...]’” (Beetham 1996: 17). The association between women and readers is also found in *The Friendly Writer and Register of Truth*, created in 1732, which was “a monthly magazine written for women by a woman” (Cranfield 1978: 52), in *The Female Spectator* (1744-1746), in *The Lady's Magazine; or, Entertaining Companion for the Fair Sex, Appropriated Solely to their Use and Amusement* (1770-1847), or in *The Lady's Monthly Museum; or, Polite Repository of Amusement and Instruction* (1798-1832), which “was launched by ‘A Society of Ladies’” (Beetham 1996: 17). It is clear, then, that female readers were part of the audience of the periodical press.

As can be seen, women became involved in the world of reviewing, editing and writing. This multiplicity of female experiences and positions as agents in the cultural production of their time reinforces the idea that they were actively engaged in a range of creative fields connected with the press. Elizabeth Carter (1717-1806), English poet and translator, contributed to the periodical section of *The Gentleman's Magazine*, a publication founded by Edward Cave (1691-1754) in 1731. Her first book of poems and her translation of Crousaz's *Examen de l'essay de Monsieur Pope sur l'homme* [*An Examination of Mr. Pope's Essay on Man* (1739)] were issued from Cave's press (Carlson 1938: 24). Other female authors also had their literary pieces published in *The Gentleman's Magazine*. This can be seen in Mary Barber (ca. 1690-1757), Jane Brereton (1685-1740) and Mary Masters (ca. 1694-1759), whose poems “helped swell the columns” of this publication (Carlson 1938: 16). In Kairoff's words, these and other female poets who also published there, such as Mary Whateley Darwell (1738-1825), Anna Seward (1742-1809), Mary Scott (ca. 1752-1793) and Catherine Jemmat (ca. 1720-1766), “were indebted to the encouragement and sponsorship of Edward Cave, who thus played a critical role in assisting women's emergence in the literary marketplace (2001: 168). Anna Letitia Barbauld (1743-1825) also had some of her works published in magazines, as can be seen in several poems that “appeared in two journals edited by her brother (five in the *Monthly Magazine* between 1797-1800, and one in the *Annual*

Register in 1819): [...]” (Levy 2014: 55). This shows that the press provided space for female writers and their works.

Periodicals published very diverse material which often focused on political and economic news, stories, poems, songs, scientific discoveries, serialised fiction and extracts taken from other publications. Issues related to literature were among the varied topics printed in the press. Through their content, periodicals evaluated women's literary abilities and careers, which was a useful way not only to provide data about books and authors but also to engage people in the cultural life of their community and to make visible women's cultural presence in eighteenth-century Britain. By placing female writers in the public realm, the production and exchange of information about ladies and their reputation in cultural circles were significantly enhanced. Editors exposed them to an open arena which was especially valuable for the debate and discussion of their literary activity and for drawing attention to their work. In *The Westminster Magazine; or, the Pantheon of Taste* (1773-1785) of June 1776, an article, entitled “Observations on Female Literature in General, Including some Particulars Relating to Mrs. Montagu and Mrs. Barbauld,” offered a representation in the public sphere of these two learned women, Elizabeth Montagu (1720-1800) and Anna Letitia Barbauld.

In the introductory lines, the article stresses the importance of the issues attached to tradition and female education, an idea which is captured in the following statement: “Happily we do not live in those days when prejudice condemned our women to ignorance to be deplored” (June 1776: 283).⁵ It also explicitly praises those women who had freed themselves from the “slavery of custom” (June 1776: 283) and tyranny of habit, and opted for a life of learning, venturing “to think, to speak, and *to write* with propriety; [...] (June 1776: 283). This assertion clearly celebrates women's achievements and progress as the security of knowledge and skills enabled them to explore new possibilities for self-improvement and to become full participants in society.

Education has a clear role to play here. Changes in the position of women in the community are reflected in the notable fact that many of them excelled men. To confirm

⁵ The spelling, punctuation and capitalisation have been reproduced as in the original text.

this, it is explained that “[...] there are many Ladies at this time in England who do not blush –who have no reason to be ashamed to discover that they are better instructed than the majority of the smart fellows of the age” (June 1776: 283). The article shows an interest in widening women’s intellectual and offers readers a fragment of the long poem *The Feminead or, Female Genius* (1754), in which its “ingenious Author” (June 1776: 283), the English poet and clergyman, John Duncombe (1729-1786), gave recognition to female British writers. It is explicitly stated that the lines quoted from this poem “must be read by every Lady who thinks the ‘*enlargement of her mind*, as well as the expansion of her *head*,’ worth her attention, with particular pleasure: [...]” (June 1776: 283). From this, it can be inferred that the intention was that it would serve as a reading text for those women who turned their attention to the formation of the mind.

Immediately following this quotation, it is detailed that Elizabeth Montagu and Anna Letitia Barbauld were two representative figures of the period. The criteria for their inclusion in the public sphere were based on their literary activity, which is recognised as being of great significance: “In the number of ingenious Female Writers who have distinguished themselves in several branches of polite literature, the two Ladies whom we have selected for the embellishment of our present Magazine make a very brilliant appearance” (June 1776: 284). While highlighting their acknowledged status as professional writers, it is pointed out that the author could not, “for obvious reasons, expatiate on their respective merits in a manner agreeable to his inclination; [...]” (June 1776: 284). Certainly, his writing is neither a biographical article nor a comprehensive study on their works but a brief general account of their careers and character. Readers are told that the author hopes his sketches of their literary characters would not cause these women any annoyance or displeasure. On the contrary, he wishes they would bring them contentment (June 1776: 284).

“Pleasing person,” “liberal mind,” “benevolent heart” and “large fortune” are some of the phrases used in the article to describe the personality and attributes of Elizabeth Montagu, who is also reported to possess a solidity of understanding and elegance of taste (June 1776: 284). These qualities, says the author, are very noticeable both in her life and

in her writings (June 1776: 284).⁶ To these representations were added two short pieces of writing extracted from contemporary works with which the author continues to develop his portrayal of this female writer. The first quotation was written by Elizabeth Carter⁷ and the second by Alexander Pope (1688-1744), whose names were rendered in the article. Carter's phrase comes from one of her works included in her *Poems on Several Occasions* (1762). It reads: "By fortune follow'd, and by Virtue led" (Carter 1766: 14). The second poetic line is taken from Pope's "Epistle to Mrs. Blount, with the Works of Voiture" (1712). It says: "With wit well-natur'd and with books well bred" (Pope 1903: 80).

The article implies a description of Montagu as an intelligent character with several remarks concerning her literary works. Her richly cultivated and highly polished mind is indicated to have had a significant influence on her productions which are perceived to be "truly classical, and which may be frequently read with renewed satisfaction" (June 1776: 284). Reference is made to two of her works, the three sections in George Lyttleton's *Dialogues of the Dead* (1760) and *An Essay on the Writings and Genius of Shakespear, Compared with the Greek and French Dramatic Poets: with some Remarks upon the Misrepresentations of Mons. de Voltaire* (1769). Readers are informed that her three dialogues "abound with good sense, sprightly sentiment, and sound morality" (June 1776: 284). The first dialogue, between Cadmus and Hercules, "acknowledges the threat of luxury and effeminacy" and also "affirms the importance of 'the united strength of civil community' against the Herculean preference for military issues" (Mee 2011: 108). It favours intelligence and learning over strength as is "calculated to set forth the use and excellence of learning" (*The Westminster Magazine*, June 1776: 284). The second dialogue, between Mercury and a modern fine Lady, satirises the fashionable women of the period and is considered to be "a pleasant ridicule on the trifling, dissipated manner in which our modish fair ones mispend their time" (*The Westminster Magazine*, June 1776: 284). In the third dialogue, between Plutarch, Charon and a modern bookseller, Montagu parodies the bookseller's vacuity (Mee 2011: 108). This dialogue was written to be "a

⁶ Her husband, Edward Montagu, had died in 1775, leaving her an immense fortune.

⁷ Carter was a close friend of Montagu's.

lively satire on the literary taste of the present age, which, to the great disgrace of letters, delights in fabulous, obscene, and immoral romances" (*The Westminster Magazine*, June 1776: 284). According to the magazine writer, these three dialogues and *An Essay on the Writings and Genius of Shakespear*, in particular, display Montagu's judgment and taste (June 1776: 284).

An Essay on the Writings and Genius of Shakespear defends English playwright and poet William Shakespeare (1564-1616) against the published attacks by the French author Voltaire (1694-1778). In this work, Montagu compares Shakespeare favourably with both modern French and ancient Greek poet-playwright and criticises Voltaire indicating that there were some obvious mistakes in his translation of *Julius Caesar* into French due to significant misinterpretations of the meaning of several words and phrases. In the eighteenth century, both periodical publications and notable contemporary figures contributed to the rise of Shakespeare's reputation. *The Monthly Review*, *The London Magazine* and *The Universal Magazine* together with Horace Walpole (1717-1797), Samuel Johnson and Elizabeth Montagu were "among those who responded directly to Voltaire's aspersions, [...]" (Prince 2012: 277).

The validity and truth of Montagu's response to Voltaire's translation of *Julius Caesar* is stressed in the article under discussion with the following words: "The charge against Voltaire of misrepresentations, of not understanding the English language, and of his being guilty of the greatest absurdities in his translation of the first act of *Shakespeare's Julius Cæsar*, are abundantly proved" (June 1776: 284). Yet, the merits of this essay are indicated not to be confined "to a mere defence of Shakespeare, or to the observations on Voltaire's criticisms" (June 1776: 284) as it also "abounds with curious disquisitions, [...]" (June 1776: 284). The "parallel drawn between the conduct of the two Poets, in respect to the Ghost of Darius, in the *Perseus* of Eschylus, and that of Hamlet" (June 1776: 284) together with the comparisons made between Shakespeare and the French dramatist writers are said to have been "attended with a great number of the most judicious and beautiful observations" (June 1776: 284). According to the author, Montagu's essay "will undoubtedly hold a high rank among the most classical pieces of the same nature in the English language" (June 1776: 284).

The portrait of Anna Letitia Barbauld reveals a woman of letters who had just entered the literary world and “charmed all those who have a true relish for the effusions of the genius under the immediate inspiration of the Muses, [...]” (*The Westminster Magazine*, June 1776: 284). Indeed, her first poems had been published just a few years before, in 1772. They had appeared in *Essays on Song-Writing*, a book by her brother, John Aikin (1747-1822). The next year saw the publication of a collection of her *Poems*. This major work enjoyed immediate success, reaching five editions by 1777 (Levy 2014: 45). Following the brief account of the beginnings of Barbauld's poetic career, the article proceeds to represent her character and intellectual formation. Her attractiveness is worthy of the following comment: “[t]his Lady is not only *poetically enchanting*, but personally attractive” (June 1776: 284). Her intellectual powers are particularly noticeable both when having a conversation with her, “as she seems not to be conscious of an understanding superior to the greatest part of her sex [...]” (June 1776: 285), and when she is silent as “[h]er eye *speaks* sense distinct and clear” (June 1776: 285). Her behaviour is carefully considered to ensure that she is worthy for admiration as “she never opens her lips to deliver her thoughts with an *oracular* sententiousness; nor does she ever converse with an *oracular* duplicity” (June 1776: 285). Furthermore, it is indicated that she always behaves with decorum, is discreet in her public displays and never uses conversation to gain admiration nor says things that do not need to be said (June 1776: 285).

In addition to that, readers learn that Barbauld shows the same manner with her lettered friends, with whom she acts with honesty and openness and with the least affectation (*Westminster Magazine*, June 1776: 285). She also proves to be especially cautious with the illiterate in order “to shade her talents with the veil of diffidence, that she may not force them to feel their inferiority” (June 1776: 285). This phrase seems to be warning against pedantry and implies that Barbauld had an objection to any ostentatious display of her own knowledge and cultural level. Her gentleness and propriety of conduct, which is described to be “uncommonly pleasing” (June 1776: 285), as well as the “mildness of her manners, and her affability to all kinds of people, throw an inexpressible *charm* over her whole person, and induce us to venerate the beauties of her mind” (June 1776: 285).

References to her literary work are more specifically addressed in the last part of the article. Here, it is maintained that she writes with a perfectly Horatian and cultivated style and that her poetical compositions have a masculine force, “which the most-vigorous of our poets has not excelled: [...]” (June 1776: 285). It is further explained that there is “nothing, indeed, feminine belonging to them, but a certain gracefulness of expression (in which dignity and beauty are both included) that marks them for the productions of a Female Hand” (June 1776: 285). Finally, the description is extended to the quality of her prose, which is praised for its elegance and brilliance.⁸ According to the author, these pieces in prose “in point of *elegance*, are as much superior to the laboured Effays of our *furdy Moralists* as the easy motions of a fine Gentleman are, in point of *grace*, to the stiff attitudes of a *Dancing-master*” (June 1776: 285).

Montagu's and Barbauld's identities are mainly defined by their character and literary activity. The references made in the magazine article regarding their personalities and minds include adjectives and expressions such as “pleasing,” “liberal,” “benevolent,” “solidity,” “elegance,” “richly cultivated,” “highly polished,” “personally attractive,” “intellectual powers,” “understanding superior,” “distinct,” “clear,” “least affectation,” “doubly cautious,” “delicacy,” “propriety,” “mildness of her manners,” “affability,” “charm,” and “beauties of her mind” (June 1776: 284-285). These statements express a personal opinion which highlights these women's intellectual capacity and potential. Other comments are used in reference to their work. They also consist of positive representations such as “truly classical,” “good sense,” “sprightly sentiments,” “sound morality,” “pleasant ridicule,” “lively satire,” “curious disquisitions,” “high rank,” “judicious and beautiful observations,” “poetically enchanting,” “masculine force,” “gracefulness of expression,” “dignity,” “beauty,” “elegantly polished,” “harmoniously easy,” “beautiful poems,” “elegance” and “superior” (June 1776: 284-285). In the assessment of these women's cultural activity, their portrayals are a clear indication that the author acknowledged their recognised position in the literary world with favourable

⁸ William McCarthy suggests the enormous impact and popularity of her books for children, which continued to be reprinted for decades after her death (2014: 19).

comments which evidenced that both writers were reckoned to deserve a place in the British literary sphere.

The representation of female voices in the media helps to give an indication of how periodical publications made a contribution to raising awareness of women's position in cultural life. Production and publication of their writings increased readers' understanding of female's cultural activity. Circulation of literary descriptions through the printing press enabled ordinary people to extend their view of women's reputation in the literary world as well as to build and enhance their knowledge of this specific area of study. In this respect, the press engaged in the social culture of the period and displayed messages that provided an opportunity to frame discussion of gender in literature. Accordingly, it served a social purpose by providing coverage of different literary forms, not only fiction but also poetry, which helped readers to form a judgment and express their opinion on issues of current concern such as the literary talent of women and the literary respectability achieved by them. The presence of Elizabeth Montagu and Anna Letitia Barbauld in *The Westminster Magazine* contributed to foster a public appreciation of these writers and to better understand their role in the literary culture of eighteenth-century Britain.

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Periodical Publications

Critical Review

Literary Magazine and British Review

Westminster Magazine

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Appendix

Analytical Review

Annual Register

British Magazine; or, Monthly Repository for Gentleman and Ladies

Covent Garden Journal

Critical Review

Examiner

Female Spectator

Friendly Writer and Register of Truth

Gentleman's Magazine

Lady's Magazine; or, Entertaining Companion for the Fair Sex, Appropriated Solely to their Use and Amusement

Lady's Monthly Museum; or, Polite Repository of Amusement and Instruction

Lady's Museum

Literary Magazine and British Review

London Post

London Review of English and Foreign Literature

Monthly Magazine

Monthly Review

Review

Tatler