

Dr. Howe
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Scholars Day

Beware Women!

Jonathan Swift and Lady Mary Wortley Montagu on Women and Writing in the 18th Century

Today, we often think of poetry as something private, interior, and emotional. This approach to poetry derives from Romantic-era concepts of genius, which evolved at the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century—think Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Keats. But what was the cultural function of poetry in earlier periods? And how can an awareness of this difference help us interpret particular poems? Let's take a look at an excerpt from an essay by scholar J. Paul Hunter, called "Couplets and Conversation." What central ideas does he bring up about poets and poetry in the 18th century?

Notes:

So, let's think about how this information can help us understand two poems that stage a kind of debate—we might try to think of them as offering competing approaches to the concept of gender in the early eighteenth century.

In his scathingly misanthropic 1732 poem "The Lady's Dressing Room," Jonathan Swift takes up the "ugly truth" behind the public image of well-bred ladies. He creates a narrator who describes—having experienced it himself—what a young lover, named Strephon, sees upon entering his beloved's dressing room. Strephon is shocked at the filth he finds there, but the narrator, having been through all this before, has some advice for the young swain (129ff). Lady Mary Wortley Montagu is a contemporary of Swift's, and they moved in similar literary circles. As an *aristocrat*, she had more leeway to write, to travel, and to be educated, but as a *woman*, she was generally restricted from entering the public sphere as a published writer. So, she circulated her works in manuscript form, to be read by those of her private acquaintance. Montagu wrote a response to Swift's poem, which she titles "The Reasons that Induced Dr. S--- to Write a Poem Called 'The Lady's Dressing Room'" (1732). In the poem, she uses parody to create a counter-narrative to Swift. In her poem, Swift is a posturing, pedantic, self-obsessed man going to visit a prostitute, but when he can't perform, he blames her "damned close stool" (70).

Clearly, the poems respond to one another in content. But, they also play a fascinating game of formal imitation with a difference—the "inventory" (Swift 10) of the lady's dressing room in Swift's poem is mirrored by a philosophical and political "digression" (Montagu 34) in Montagu's. Why would Montagu adopt his style and form, but make this particular kind of substitution? And what is the effect, if we think about poetry as a public institution in the eighteenth century, of Montagu's work being a privately circulated response by a woman to a public poem by a well-known male writer? How does Swift address what we would typically understand as a "private" space—the space of the lady's dressing room? Is Montagu's poem looking into something private, or something public? Is there any way Montagu might be commenting on her restricted role as a female writer?

After we listen to the poems, consider the following questions with a peer and jot down a few thoughts.

Swift, “The Lady’s Dressing Room” (1732)

1. What kinds of things—being specific!—does Strephon find in Celia's dressing room? Are these public things, or private things?
2. What does the narrator (the “I” in the poem) say about Strephon's disgust—what is his advice?
3. Why do you think the narrator is making Strephon’s experience of this private world public?

Montagu, “The Reasons that Induced Dr. S---t to Write a Poem Called ‘The Lady’s Dressing Room’” (1732)

4. How does Montagu describe the “Dean” in the beginning of her response—what kind of character does she paint him to be?
5. What does she discuss in her “digression” (34)? Try to be specific!
6. What happens between the “reverend lover” (63) and Betty, his nymph?
7. What does Montagu suggest about Swift's poem—what is it good for? Does this moment parallel with any specific moments in Swift’s poem?

Tying it all together: Why do you think Montagu is countering Swift in these ways? Remember that the modern public sphere, which was emerging in the 18th century, is a site where the literate, participatory citizen “becomes more widely active in discussing, and ultimately, deciding issues of public concern” (15). What is the “issue of public concern” that these poems seem to be debating? Who do you think, historically, won this debate? Do we have a responsibility to look more closely?