

2015

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Recommended Citation

Runge, Laura L. (2015) "Review of Elizabeth Eger (ed.), *Bluestockings Displayed: Portraiture, Performance and Patronage, 1730-1830*," *ABO: Interactive Journal for Women in the Arts, 1640-1830*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 1 , Article 4.

<https://www.doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.5038/2157-7129.5.1.3>

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/abo/vol5/iss1/4>

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Abstract

Review of Elizabeth Eger's edited collection, *Bluestockings Displayed: Portraiture, Performance and Patronage, 1730-1830* (Cambridge UP 2013).

Keywords

Bluestockings, portraiture, women authors, female sopranos, female artists, 1730-1830

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Elizabeth Eger, editor. *Bluestockings Displayed: Portraiture, Performance and Patronage, 1730-1830*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2013. Xvi + 309pp. Illus. Index. ISBN 978-0-521-67880-1.

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The title of this essay collection refers to the National Portrait Gallery exhibition in 2008 that inspired the book, but *Bluestockings Displayed* also hints at salacious—maybe naughty—content. The reader need not be alarmed. Though a major thrust of the book is to dislodge the stereotype of the bluestocking as trivial old lady and restore the original context in which these paragons of learning shone, the bluestockings remain—with some notable exceptions—as virtuous as ever. With the move from exhibit and conference to essay collection, the book raises a tension between the ephemeral and public experience of curation and the repeatable, private titillation of print. The abundant images of the famous women—there are sixty-one—are clearly a selling feature of the book, something that might not have sat well with the original sitters. Through the essays, however, we learn it is an appropriate frisson, not unlike what the bluestockings experienced when moving from *salonnière* to author.

This is the latest in the Elizabeth Eger industry of bluestocking scholarship, and because it adds the crucial dimension of visual representation, it is a significant contribution. As E. J. Clery puts it: “Increased awareness of the extent and diversity of the pictorial archive has provided an added impetus among researchers to explore the complexities and difficulties in the situation of these women, and do justice to their own nuanced reflections on publicity” (39). The subtitle of the book “Portraiture, Performance and Patronage, 1730-1830,” supplies the organizational structure for the collection’s three parts. All but one of the twelve essays discuss the visual presence and analyze bluestocking iconography, from formal full length portraits by Ramsay and Reynolds to scurrilous satiric prints. The familiar names among the contributors make up a modern analogue to the bluestocking network. The scholarship is unsurprisingly excellent, but the reader will also enjoy knowing how Elizabeth Carter looks as a Roman centurion and why there are so many long (masculine, intelligent) noses gracing the early bluestocking portraits.

Along lines similar to Nicole Pohl and Betty Schellenberg’s 2003 collection *Reconsidering the Bluestockings*, this book expands the category of Bluestocking to include a wide range of hostesses, authors and performers, from Elizabeth Carter in the 1730s through Felicia Hemans in the 1830s. Despite the variety, the collection maintains the centrifugal force of Elizabeth Montagu as Queen of the Blues. Each essay defines “bluestocking” to accommodate its subject with the overarching sense that the figure has to be a woman of “learning.” The meaning of “learning,” however, can be malleable, as when Joseph Roach claims the soprano Eliza Linley exhibited “exceptionally intelligent musical interpretation” (127) or Susan Staves argues for the inclusion of Bordoni and Mara who “demonstrated a female capacity for learned musicianship” (141). Likewise Shearer West includes Sarah Siddons despite the fact that she was neither an intellectual nor a conversationalist because, among other things, Siddons studied acting thoroughly.

For *Bluestockings Displayed*, Linley clearly has a right to be in the collection because she is the central figure in Richard Samuels’ 1778 flattering painting commonly known as “The Nine Living Muses of Great Britain.” Most of the essays in the collection use Samuels’ image as a

touchstone for the cultural impression these “brilliant” women made in their time. All of the pictured women, Angellica Kauffman, Elizabeth Carter, Anna Aikin Barbauld, Elizabeth Linley, Catharine Macaulay, Elizabeth Montagu, Elizabeth Griffith, Hannah More and Charlotte Lennox, are referenced throughout the collection, though only Carter, Linley, and Montagu have essays focused on themselves. The priority on art and performance brings attention to some less studied figures, like Anne Damer, professional sculptor. Given our gaps in knowledge, one wishes Alison Yarrington’s breezy review of Damer’s network had fuller explanations, for example, of Damer’s image in the satiric print by Hannah Humphrey (85). Her passing reference to Damer’s “apparent innate deviant sexuality and erratic enthusiasms” requires contextualization (81).

Elizabeth Carter is the subject of Clery’s impressive analysis of Alexander Pope’s influence on the verbal and pictorial representation of intellectual women. Relegated to being only “a softer man” (48), women like the prodigiously learned Carter were portrayed using masculine signifiers, such as the soldier’s garb and the long nose. (Clery has a good time describing the especially diminutive Pope’s concerted efforts to man-up his portraits, which become a veritable “extravaganza of noses” [50]). The recently rediscovered portrait of Carter in breastplate and helmet (John Frayman c. 1735-41) featured in color on the dust jacket also serves as the starting point of Barlow’s investigation of the shift in cultural values that underpinned the rise of bluestocking success. Whereas Anne Mellor deftly outlines the threatening status of women as professional readers and authors in the early nineteenth century in order to show how bluestockings came to be denied their brilliant social allure, Barlow begins from the other chronological end to suggest that the increasing cultural alignment of female learning and patriotic morality allowed for a feminization of the bluestocking image by mid eighteenth century.

Carter also makes a brief showing in the conclusion of Devoney Looser’s analysis of the portraits of bluestockings in old age. Looser compares the negative reception of Piozzi’s late life portrait as frontispiece to her *Retrospection* (1801) to Hannah More’s more popular decision to forgo visual representation and parlay the “infirmity of age apology” (111) in a series of late writings. With welcome irony, Looser suggests how Carter posthumously improves on More’s strategy: “If claiming that a work was your last one offered was one way for an aged woman writer to smooth rough critical waters, actually waiting until you *had* died to publish would seem even more failsafe” (113). Carter’s biography, written by her nephew, was fronted by a decorous old age portrait, but according to Looser his emphasis on piety and “banal goodness” might have been overdone, given that the critical reviews dismissed Carter’s intellectual achievement (114). Looser concludes the portraits of aging blues “demonstrate how difficult it was to convince the public that learned and literary women might age well” (116).

Elizabeth Montagu, mentioned in nearly every essay, takes center stage in three: Shearer West’s study of Lady Macbeth; Markman Ellis’ analysis of the books mentioned in Montagu’s correspondence, and Clarissa Campbell Orr’s article on court politics and the Queen of the blues. Between Ellis and Orr we get a detailed view of Carter’s networks just prior to her rise as a bluestocking hostess. Analyzing a corpus of one thousand letters written to and from Montagu in the 1750s, Ellis presents a breakdown of Montagu’s books. Though there are no pictures in the chapter, Ellis includes two tables charting the names of correspondents and the numbers of letters on books as well as the topics covered in the letters. Among the many points this data

establishes, we learn Montagu clearly favored history as reading material, the percentage of her correspondence to women fell over the course of the decade, she engaged in social literary criticism, and even—with George Lyttelton—practiced a form of collaborative writing. He concludes: “Elizabeth Montagu taught herself to have the authority to make public utterances on books and other cultural products through a series of critical practices, refined through her correspondence with a closely knit group of men and women” (228). Ellis is the only author not to include any visual representations of the bluestockings, but one can hardly fault Eger for including him in the volume.

Orr’s chapter follows Ellis directly and adds a political explanation to the emergence of Montagu’s role as *salonnière*. Focusing on the court, Orr aims to change the conversation about the bluestockings from feminism and female mentorship to the political context of Edward Montagu in the Patriot opposition under Frederick, Prince of Wales, to Elizabeth Montagu’s role as the wife of an MP, and to the male-female relationships that informed her development as a *salonnière*. Presenting clear information about the complicated changing court roles of the 1750s, Orr argues persuasively that Elizabeth Montagu’s ambitions might have turned toward political hostessing if the independence of her husband, the death of her only child, and the personalities in the Montagu kinship network had not cut off those possibilities.

Though not particularly understudied as an eighteenth-century figure, Hester Lynch Thrale Piozzi receives insightful and original treatment in two standout essays in the collection. Both focus on the Hester Lynch *after* she broke with Montagu and the blues. Already mentioned is Looser’s treatment of Piozzi’s old age portrait. Felicity Nussbaum focuses on the “much-neglected and seriously underestimated” (188) published writing of Piozzi, in particular her poetry. Nussbaum is consistently a first rate literary historian and critic. Rich in the particulars of written texts, portraits, history and biography, Nussbaum’s essay exposes a different branch in the bluestocking network—the once accepted then dissident and then revitalized female intellect. In this telling, Piozzi successfully flouts the “contracted” virtue of Montagu and Chapone (195), reveling in the passion that makes her a bluestocking anomaly. Compelling in part because the writing published during Piozzi’s lifetime truly is understudied, Nussbaum does an excellent job convincing me it is worth my attention.

Publishing sixty-one images is undoubtedly costly. The visual feast in *Bluestocking Displayed* is ambitious and appreciated, and it will give rise to new research questions. Despite the wealth of images, though, there is a notable lack. Where are the portraits of Elizabeth Montagu? Besides the allegorized image of Montagu in Samuels’ “Nine Living Muses,” and a conjectural identification in a Bowles and Carver caricature, we do not get to see the Queen of the Blues. We know the images exist, and the contributors have seen them. In an extended discussion, Barlow details Ramsay’s 1762 grand three-quarter portrait of Montagu; she teases us with the “rose-coloured dress, with its lovingly delineated lace cuffs” (69). The same portrait is described by West, Ellis and Orr. The latter mistakenly refers to it as figure 2.6, which is actually the Ramsay portrait of Frances Boscawen. All these hints, yet no ocular proof. West notes that the portrait is in a private collection (172), so presumably the publisher was unable to get permission to reproduce it. It is a shame. At one point Ellis’ exceptional textual study probably included a picture.

Seeing the portraits, prints, and statues of these intelligent, influential women of the eighteenth-century clearly elicits a desire to see more. Clery’s observation on the importance of the pictorial

archive suggests there are many possible paths for visual scholarship on eighteenth-century women. It also points to the benefits of digital publications, like *ABO*, that are not constrained by costs in reproducing images. Moreover, all of the images in *Bluestocking Displayed* are in black and white, except the impressive Carter on the cover. For future scholarship in a digital format, readers will be able to see more of these interesting figures and possibly appreciate for themselves Montagu's delightfully feminine pink costume.