

Gillian Russell, *Women, Sociability and Theatre in Georgian London*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. xiii, 289 p. ISBN 9780521867320; 0521867320.

The re-evaluation of Habermas' public sphere and its relationship to gender ideology continues apace. Gillian Russell's book *Women, Sociability and Theatre in Georgian London* provides a fascinating addition to this literature with a careful examination of how women carved out a space in the public sphere through sociability and creative use of the rapidly expanding supply of printed periodicals. Here Russell's primary interest is women's intrusion into Habermas' "authentic public sphere" through the otherwise acceptable activity of "domiciliary sociability," a concept Russell defines as the "point of intersection between the 'conjugal family's internal space' and other elements of the authentic public sphere in the private realm".¹ In other words, women were able to stake out a space through "social interaction that was oriented towards the positive goals of pleasure, companionship or the reinforcement of family, group and professional identities".²

In this account gender cannot be separated from sociability. Women served as hostesses and visitors, and facilitated all sorts of interaction in public and private settings. They were key participants in the balls, dances, card parties, routs, and dinners that made up domiciliary sociability. It is for this reason, Russell argues, that female presence in the public sphere of print and entertainment caused so much anxiety among men. Not only did they endanger their own feminine modesty and virtue, but they also threatened to throw men into a state of effeminacy by setting up standards of male behavior. In Russell's reading, male failure to tie female sociability to an identifiable, non-commercial space becomes a major preoccupation for playwrights and social commentators alike.

At a more descriptive level, Russell's work usefully fills a gap in the historiography of eighteenth-century recreation by devoting attention to Madame Cornelys' establishment at Carlisle House on Soho Square, the *Pantheon*, and the *Ladies Coterie*, a club originally founded at *Almack's*. Despite not being the subject of detailed examinations themselves, the prominence

¹ Gillian Russell, *Women, Sociability and Theatre in Georgian London* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 11.

² *Ibid.* 9.

of these venues in later eighteenth-century London is clear to anyone who has attempted to examine recreation in the period, and Russell provides a well-researched addition to the historiography.

The book is arranged chronologically around seven events that Russell uses to track shifts in the relationship between women and the public sphere. Beginning with Teresa Cornelys and the society at Carlisle House, Russell describes how Cornelys cultivated the press and set herself up as a symbol of entertainment in the metropolis. In the following chapter the masquerades at Carlisle House are considered as comments on contemporary politics, particularly as a forum for responding to Wilkite and radical critics of the political elite. In this reading masquerades in a female-controlled space such as Carlisle House seriously undermined the masculine public sphere. Looking to mixed gender, *Almack's* and the *Ladies Coterie*, a club that controversially admitted women, Russell looks at men's fears over their inability to situate female sociability and sexuality. The *Pantheon*, which opened in 1772, was another commercial venue, but more obviously commercial than Carlisle House or *Almack's*. The openness of this new venture led to concerns over the publicity of visiting a site where anyone could be there to see and be seen. Chapter 6 looks at portrayals of women in plays, particularly Colman's *The Clandestine Marriage* and Burgoyne's *The Maid of the Oaks*. In these plays Russell finds male playwrights trying to reclaim authority over women in the public sphere by attacking fashionable sociability. Just as Chapter 6 shows that fashionable women were associated with actresses, Chapter 7, looking at the Duchess of Kingston's trial for bigamy, presents fashionable women in public acting in a theatrical fashion. The theatricalization and commercialization of the court, Russell argues, led to a loss of power by the Lords who let their authority slip into the public sphere. As the trial proceeded, discussion in the press made the decisions of the Lords a matter of public concern to an unprecedented degree. The final chapter focuses on women's hairstyles and the ways in which the public portrayal of anxiety over women's headdress reveals the extent of the changes in the boundaries of gender over the period.

Russell's brings together an extensive array of previously unexamined printed sources, both from Georgian newspapers and periodicals and modern editions of journals and letter collections. It is richly and carefully illustrated and argues, largely convincingly, for a change in the way the press discussed how women were received in the public sphere over the period.

That said, at times Russell's seems to protest too much at the importance of Cornelys' society and the tumult it caused. In her quest to portray Carlisle House as a venue for deep political commentary and as a space where male authority was questioned, Russell probably overshoots the mark. Cornelys was clearly a savvy business woman who carefully created an image for herself in the press, but when Russell tries to demonstrate how troubling Carlisle House was to Georgian men she seems to get overexcited. For example, Russell argues that the proximity of Carlisle House to an unofficial club at the home of Sir Joseph Banks is "important to note" because Banks' club "inevitably" defined itself against Carlisle House.³ The topographical importance of Soho Square gets further elevated as a zone that mediates "the national identity of a city and the cosmopolitanism that makes it a metropolis" and is likened to Greenwich Village in New York or the Latin Quarter in Paris.⁴ A place so important, Russell asserts, that Soho in the 1760s becomes "the model for this kind of metropolitan zone."⁵ We can also find this hyperbolic insistence on the importance of her subject matter in her examination of Cornelys and Carlisle House as a threat to masculinity as instanced by Wilkes' rare appearances there and preference for "the more masculine domains of the club and coffee-house, the tavern and the theatre".⁶ Unfortunately Russell's assertion about Wilkes preferring male-dominated spaces is based on an inaccurate impression of where he tended to go for social occasions. It is true that Wilkes was not a frequent visitor to Carlisle House, but he was not often found at coffee houses or theatres either. Wilkes certainly tended to spend his time with men (or with his female lovers), but he did so largely in clubs and private settings.⁷

Underlying Russell's book is an attempt to show that Amanda Vickery was wrong to assert that little changed for women between the 1720s and 1820s. Rather, the 1760s and 70s were a period of intense anxiety and re-negotiation of women's place in the public sphere. Russell would have strengthened her case for the 1760s and 70s being a "hot spot" in patterns of gender relations by more carefully comparing her period with those before and after. While it is logical that the criticisms of the institutions and behaviors she is interested in differed from those

³ Ibid. 34.

⁴ Ibid. 34.

⁵ Ibid. 34.

⁶ Ibid. 49.

⁷ See Wilkes' diary, British Library MSS Add 30866.

arising from male-led innovations such as Ranelagh or Heidegger's masquerades of the second quarter of the century, Russell only mentions them in passing. Similarly, Russell is tracking the emergence of a female-friendly public sphere, but we are left with only a brief comment in the conclusion about the following decades. Did anxiety continue into the years of the French Revolution? Or did people come to accept the female presence as Russell seems to suggest? Russell suggests that she will demonstrate the scope of the anxiety over women's actions, but there is no systematic attempt to demonstrate the prevalence of these comments, nor does she suggest how we might make such a judgment.

Russell leaves many of the implications of her critique of Vickery open to interpretation. If, as Vickery says, the conditions in the 1820s were similar to the 1720s and, as Russell says, between 1760 and 1780 women carved out a space for themselves in the authentic public sphere, what happened between 1720 and 1760 or 1780 to 1820 to reduce women's involvement in the public sphere? Russell's suggestion that her treatment of a short period does not contradict Vickery's scheme is difficult to support because she never seeks to put the period of change into the context of long-term continuity or change. The prominence of women in print at the end of the period does not necessarily clarify or adjust our ideas about the conditions of life for women in daily life, in marriage, or in the workforce, the ostensible *foci* of Vickery's statement. For historians, the sorts of changes that we look for over the short or long term may indicate whether we find change and how we quantify it. If an aspect of life changed as dramatically as Russell shows, but the overall outline of women's lives remained the same, how do small changes in conditions of living relate to the overall structure of experience?

Convincing as her case is for a change in an aspect of life among socially elite women in the metropolis, questions remain about the depth and breadth of the change Russell presents. Russell has made an extensive search through an impressively wide selection of newspapers (including, according to the bibliography, *The Times* and the *Times Literary Supplement*, papers that presumably have little evidence for her statements about the 1760s and 70s). But the reader would benefit from more background on the London press. To what extent is the prominence of Madame Cornelys, the *Coterie*, and the *Pantheon* the result of the growth of print, a growth that would have made all sorts of events more prominent in the public eye? And what public does she think reacted to the developments and read the *Masquerade Intelligence* she discusses in chapter 3? It is not surprising to find Lady Mary Coke or Horace Walpole drawn into these debates, but

what about the lesser gentry or the bachelor boys of the Inns of Court? The newspapers Russell cites most frequently (*Middlesex Chronicle*, *Morning Chronicle*, or *Town and Country Magazine*) are all publications closely associated with high society. How do their commentaries compare with papers more concerned with City events such as the *Public Advertiser*? Here an opportunity to think about target audiences and the scope of the "hot spot" Russell wants to present go begging. The role of the publishers in all this is also unclear. How much were papers creating a controversy to sell copy? Despite her failure to examine these broad questions, Russell has created a careful and persuasive examination of a public renegotiation of the relationship between gender and the public sphere that raises important questions and should spur further work on the under-examined concept of sociability.

Benjamin Heller

Keble College, Oxford