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*The Feminization Debate in Eighteenth-Century England:
Literature, Commerce, and Luxury* (review)

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Journal of the History of Sexuality, Volume 19, Number 1, January
2010, pp. 153-158 (Review)

Published by University of Texas Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/sex.0.0078>

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Book Reviews

The Feminization Debate in Eighteenth-Century England: Literature, Commerce, and Luxury. By E. J. CLERY. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. Pp. 256. \$110.00 (cloth); \$36.95 (paper).

In her incisive study, *The Feminization Debate in Eighteenth-Century England: Literature, Commerce, and Luxury*, E. J. Clery proposes to understand anew how the category of gender impacted the debate surrounding the rise of a capitalist economy in England. At the heart of this economic debate, Clery suggests, we discover what she calls a debate regarding “feminization”—that is, “the debate generated by the perception that the status of women in society was rising and that women were gaining an increasing influence over men and altering the manners and morals of the nation” (1). Unsurprisingly, such a perception proved ideologically volatile: on the one hand, women’s social power could be “condemned as cause and symptom of national decline”; on the other hand, it just as easily could be “celebrated as an index of increasing refinement or civility” (1).

For better and for worse, then, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English women were made to shoulder an exceedingly heavy ideological burden. As Clery argues, women served not only as symbolic markers for the economic transformations under way in England but also and even more broadly as emblems of the vicissitudes of history as such. In the realm of economics the financial revolution of the 1690s institutionalized the forces of money, credit, and commerce that would loom large in the fantasies and the fears of the people of eighteenth-century England. Historians of the period, including J. G. A. Pocock, Paul Langford, and G. J. Barker-Benfield, have documented the social and psychological adjustments that were necessary for the English to make sense of—indeed, to make peace with—a new economic order that, among other things, called into question customary understandings of moral and political virtue, especially those values associated with the discourse of civic humanism in England. Clery

Journal of the History of Sexuality, Vol. 19, No. 1, January 2010
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draws profitably upon the work of these and other historians, but at the same time she makes a compelling case for literature's role in mediating questions of civic virtue. By examining an admirably broad range of literary genres, including journalism, poetry, and the novel, Clery is able to demonstrate convincingly how the figure of the "woman of letters" represented a departure from the privileged image of the "male warrior-citizen," who epitomized the austere ethos of civic humanism and its assumption that private interest, commerce, and all things "modern" encouraged luxury, corruption, and vice.

Clery is certainly not the first to investigate the relationship between the legitimation of commercial capitalism in England and the concurrent transformations of gender roles and sexual practices; a number of historians and literary critics have made significant contributions to this conversation. Nevertheless, Clery offers a fresh, intellectually compelling take on the subject: by concentrating on the "woman of letters"—both real (such as the poets Elizabeth Singer Rowe and Elizabeth Carter) and imagined (Samuel Richardson's protagonists Pamela and Clarissa)—she supplements and complicates the work of historians and literary critics who have investigated the lives of eighteenth-century women in reference to the culture of sensibility (G. J. Barker-Benfield) or the literature of bourgeois domesticity (Terry Eagleton and Nancy Armstrong). For Clery, in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries the "feminization" of traditionally masculine concepts of civic virtue was a thoroughly public affair. Not only did the cultural power of women become an urgent matter for public discussion, but at the same time women writers themselves began directly to shape the form and substance of the literary public sphere.

Proponents of modernization regarded the woman of letters as both the sign and guarantee of increasing refinement, civility, and commercial prosperity—in a word, *progress*. In this sense the salutary transformations attributed to women's influence over men and, indeed, the public as such resonated with changing views of history. The notion that material progress could be cultivated, perhaps even counted on to continue indefinitely, challenged traditional conceptions of history as a cyclical process of decline and fall. The vision of history associated with the masculinist ethos of civic humanism predicts that material comforts will breed the forms of "effeminacy" that erode the civic order and that consequently pave the way for its imminent "fall" through moral corruption. In opposition to this brand of cyclical history, feminization implies a progressive and linear historical trajectory into a future freed from the regressive dynamics of decline and fall. But in order for this history to become intelligible and possible, "commerce" needed to be morally cleansed of its association with luxury and vice and, instead, regarded as compatible with—even conducive to—virtue (now understood as a "feminized" virtue). Given that Clery's study concentrates primarily on the period from the 1690s to the 1750s (that is, before most

of the major theoretical innovations of the Scottish historical school), her detailed account of the feminization debate compellingly suggests that the idea of historical progress was fashioned to a large extent through the heterosocial dynamics of the literary public sphere that came into being in the early eighteenth century.

If the discourse of feminization promised “a triumphant movement towards increased civility and refinement” (6), the road toward historical progress didn’t run smooth. Clery’s recounting of the fortunes of feminization proceeds in three stages and charts a movement of emergence, retrenchment, and, finally, decisive reassertion. Chapters 1 and 2 focus on the coffeehouse culture of the 1690s and early 1700s and the forms of literary journalism that capitalized on the heady mix of commerce and pleasure that coffeehouses afforded. As Clery notes in chapter 1, the financial revolution of the 1690s “evolved” in the context of coffeehouse culture, and the patrons of these establishments were understood to represent the restless energy and productivity of *Homo economicus*. To the eyes of some contemporaries, however, “coffee-houses raised the problem of a new-model man: an amalgamation of private passions (including the passion for acquisition) and public voice” (19). Enamored of novelty and susceptible to passion, coffeehouse patrons skirted the charge of “effeminacy” by embracing what Clery calls “a new model of heterosexual interaction focused on the moral influence of women” (21). Although a bit too briefly, Clery discusses how the coffeehouse barmaid performed a kind of “sexual alchemy,” whereby the homosocial milieu of the coffeehouse was “remasculinized” through the rapt attention male patrons paid to the barmaid, a figure of both moral guardianship and sexual allure.

The social energies that chapter 1 documents are specified further in the literary case study offered in chapter 2, where Clery traces how John Dunton’s *Athenian Mercury* (1691–96), England’s first literary periodical, captured the spirit of coffeehouse culture by translating the conversational free play of the coffeehouse into the question-and-answer format that organized its pages. Dunton’s literary enterprise from the beginning was attuned to the feminization debate; fittingly, it made a point of soliciting questions from “the Ingenious of Either Sex.” Clery offers a lively recounting of the complicated relationship that developed between Dunton and Elizabeth Singer Rowe, who over time became the *Athenian Mercury*’s most important literary contributor. Clery suggests that this woman of letters “was the equivalent on a higher literary plane of the barmaid: an object of idealizing cathexis” (35). Rowe’s privileged status in the *Athenian Mercury* was central to the periodical’s ideological impact, namely, its carving out a space in the literary public sphere for the feminist treatises and poems that appeared around the turn of the century as well as for the enormously successfully *Tatler* and *Spectator*, which Clery rightly regards as being indebted to Dunton’s mission to amplify the feminization debate.

Chapters 3 and 4 investigate the setbacks faced by the discourse of feminization in the 1720s and 1730s, especially in the wake of the financial fiasco of the South Sea Bubble (1720), which shook the “faith in linear progress” and seemingly confirmed the decline-and-fall rhythms of history. A contemporary tract succinctly draws the parallel between the Roman Empire and the English Augustans: “This is the Rotation of Governments and this is the Order of Nature, by which they are changed, transformed, and return to the same Point” (quoted at 54). Chapter 3 documents how, with the bursting of the South Sea Bubble, a misogynistic reaction capitalized on the proverbial images of Fortune and Credit as unruly women who introduce disorder into the masculine political realm. The remainder of the chapter concentrates on the literary and polemical responses to the financial crisis of the 1720s, and, through readings of John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon’s *Cato’s Letters*, Bernard Mandeville’s writings, including *The Fable of the Bees* and *The Female Tatler*, and Daniel Defoe’s *Roxana*, Clery traces how these authors rendered interestingly ambivalent recalibrations of the discourse of feminization.

Chapter 4 complements Clery’s earlier discussion of Elizabeth Singer Rowe with a close examination of the career of Elizabeth Carter, the poet and translator whose forays into the literary realm in the 1730s give a clear picture of the risks that awaited a woman of letters in a period of misogynistic resurgence. The newly intensified satire directed at women went hand in hand with the perceived link between the South Sea Bubble and the “effeminizing” effects of commercial capitalism. Unsurprisingly, it was Alexander Pope who presided over this increasingly treacherous literary landscape, and Clery subtly charts Carter’s canny poetic responses to Pope. Along the way, Clery suggestively reveals the palpable tension between “political allegiance and ideological statements” in the work of Carter and Pope: Carter, professionally and personally associated with the modernizing Whig camp, translated the writings of the Stoic Epictetus and wrote poetry sympathetic to the Stoic ethos; while Pope, a leading light of the Patriot Opposition and a partisan for the “ancients” in their battle against the “moderns,” published major poetic statements in the 1730s (such as the *Essay on Man*) in which fundamental “modern” understandings of the productive power of the passions were assimilated ideologically. “The irony,” as Clery notes, “is that Carter, alongside the other Bluestocking writers, would in future years come to emblemize the progressive tendency of the nation, while the ambivalent Pope would be portrayed as an enemy of modernity” (92).

After two decades of misogynistic backlash the discourse of feminization regains its footing in the 1740s and 1750s through the enormous cultural influence of Samuel Richardson. Richardson’s novels, of course, offer compelling representations of women whose virtue is inextricably linked to the discursive power wielded through their letter writing; at the same time, and

just as importantly for the argument of Clery's fourth and fifth chapters, the literary sensation created by *Pamela*, *Clarissa*, and *Sir Charles Grandison* revived the feminization debate that had been largely silenced during the 1720s and 1730s. Clery makes the compelling suggestion that we should understand Richardson's novels as "historical fictions," a "continuous historical chronicle" that imaginatively represents the very feminization debate that makes Richardson's literary production possible. Clery extrapolates this insight from an appendix to *Sir Charles Grandison* in which Richardson discussed the likely historical setting for each of these novels: *Pamela* (1740) takes place circa the 1710s, *Clarissa* (1747–48) is set in the late 1720s or in the 1730s, and *Sir Charles Grandison* (1753–54) is set in approximately its own time of publication. In other words, Richardson reenergized the discourse of feminization by absorbing the history of the feminization debate into the very fabric of his novels, which together constitute "a vast study of transformations in sexual politics through three generations" (95). Chapter 4 focuses on how *Clarissa's* staging of sexual difference—specifically, the war of wills between Clarissa and Lovelace—imaginatively challenges the libertine misogyny of the 1720s and 1730s and in some sense retroactively defeats it through the absolute apotheosis of Clarissa's virtue. As Clery also shows, Richardson's development of Clarissa's character subtly brings her moral virtue into alignment with the virtues of a modern commercial society.

With chapter 5 Clery pursues a number of interpretive paths, but all attest to the power of what she calls the "Richardson effect." For instance, she discusses how the correspondence between Elizabeth Carter and the poet-essayist Catherine Talbot reveals both the pleasures and the ambivalences of female literary ambition as it comes into the orbit of Richardson's "model of the learned lady as exemplar" (138). And later in the chapter Clery revisits the much-discussed subject of Richardson's circle of female advisers and provides the fresh insight that by assiduously soliciting women's opinions regarding the composition of *Sir Charles Grandison*—particularly, how he was to render his portrait of Sir Charles as a "good man"—Richardson "was asking his female correspondents to *perform* the process of feminization as an act of imagination; to literally *make* the man they would have as mate" (154).

One of the many intellectual pleasures and rewards that await the reader of *The Feminization Debate in Eighteenth-Century England* is Clery's sure-handed ability to reconstruct a persuasive critical *narrative*: when in the book's coda Clery suggests that David Hume's essays signal the promotion of the *discourse* of feminization (with its emphasis on gendered manners, civility, and refinement) into a *theory* of feminization (a vision of historical-economic progress in which "gender categories" have been fully internalized theoretically), her reader is inclined to agree with this sweeping insight—to a large extent because Clery's broadest insights are consistently grounded in a detailed, closely argued reconstruction of the

intersection between literary history and the history of politics and economics and what one might call the history of history itself. Clery's study makes real contributions to ongoing discussions regarding gender and sexuality during the British Enlightenment, and it deserves the attention of literary critics and social scientists alike.

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Medieval Marriage: Symbolism and Society. By DAVID L. D'AVRAY. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. Pp. 322. \$195.00 (cloth); \$45.00 (paper).

David d'Avray opens *Medieval Marriage* with a 2004 quotation from the *New Yorker*, outlining, as d'Avray puts it, "how the modern intellectual sees medieval marriage." According to Adam Haslett, the *New Yorker* writer, marriages in the Middle Ages were made for political and financial reasons. Emotional bonds between husband and wife were thus not central to marriage, the idea of companionate marriage arriving only with the Reformation. The medieval Catholic Church, which prized sexual chastity above all, held marriage (and marital sexuality in particular) to be no more than a remedy for human frailty, "a more or less unfortunate necessity" for those who could not remain pure (1). If marital sexuality was less sinful than extramarital sexuality, it remained suspect.

Few scholars of medieval marriage would agree with much of this caricature—as d'Avray points out, this is a clear example of a gap between scholarly consensus and the general knowledge even of the intelligentsia. The great contribution of d'Avray's *Medieval Marriage* is its lucid and masterful explanation for why one of the key aspects of this general picture is wrongheaded: contrary to easy assumptions that the medieval Catholic Church's prizing of clerical celibacy entailed abhorrence of sexuality of all kinds, d'Avray shows that the dominant line of ecclesiastical thinking from about 1200 onward turned in a different direction, toward an extraordinarily *high* valuation of the sexual union of husband and wife. D'Avray's argument turns on an analysis of the social power of a symbolic idea, traceable to early Christianity but only achieving its full force from the thirteenth century, that the consummation of a Christian marriage, the sexual union of a husband and wife, symbolized the mutual commitment between Christ and his church.

In about 400 CE Augustine of Hippo linked the symbolism of God's union with the church to the indissolubility of earthly Christian marriage: