



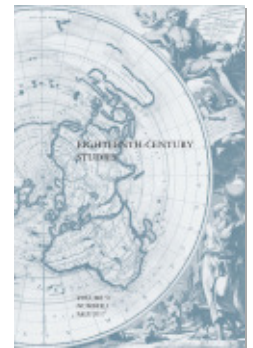
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*The Practices of the Enlightenment: Aesthetics, Authorship,  
and the Public* by Dorothea E. von Mücke (review)

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# SINGLE TITLE REVIEWS

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Dorothea E. von Mücke, *The Practices of the Enlightenment: Aesthetics, Authorship, and the Public* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015). Pp. 320. \$75.00.

As indicated by its title and subtitle, Dorothea E. von Mücke's study stakes out fields and subfields that are at once vast and specific. While the three trends named in the subtitle invoke established research areas, each of which has been the subject of countless monographs, the main title seeks to grasp these topics in the context of the more sweeping but still well-established terms of "enlightenment" and "practice," with the latter serving as a counterweight to definitions or self-definitions of the Enlightenment through its "ideas." Von Mücke seeks to provide both a supplement and an antidote to studies that look at the history of ideas in a relative vacuum, showing how, well before Kant, new forms of subjectivity were gaining recognition and taking root in religious spiritual exercises that tended toward their own secularization in systematic practices of attentiveness.

The coherent synthesis of so many moving parts gives *The Practices of the Enlightenment* a breathtaking scope. This ambitiousness is worth emphasizing because it is easy to overlook given the no-nonsense, unpretentious erudition and slightly understated style of first-person singular scholarship with which von Mücke concisely traverses numerous canonical and noncanonical authors and potentially contentious topics regarding the legacy of the Enlightenment. Although the main focus is on German-language authors (Herder, Lessing, and Goethe as well as lesser-known figures such as Johann Arndt, Johanna Eleonora Petersen, Thomas Abbt, and Friedrich Carol von Moser), von Mücke's inclusion of extensive sections on Rousseau shows the international and comparative scope of the topics under consideration. A key virtue of this study is its ability to bring German-language scholarship of the eighteenth century into dialogue with internationally recognized theoretical paradigms. The reader should not, however, expect extensive direct analysis of these paradigms (e.g., Habermas's critical public sphere, Benedict

Anderson's imagined communities), which serve primarily to define the inherited framework of scholarly discourse. Such positions are the springboards that energize more granular investigations and critical rereadings of studies in more specialized areas such as German Pietism.

This relative particularity of the individual analyses should not be allowed to obscure the fact that von Mücke's overall goal is a fundamental revision of our collective view of the Enlightenment. To pinpoint this, I would connect all three sections of the study to her central conceptualization of "disinterested interest"—which is derived not from Kant but from much more exoteric (often religious) sources. In part 1, "The Birth of Aesthetics, the Ends of Teleology, and the Rise of Genius," von Mücke shows how modern aesthetic perception was an outcome of Pietist contemplative interiority and attentiveness, which correlate with distance from the world and its institutions. Part 2, "Confessional Discourse, Autobiography, and Authorship," shows how modern authorship in the emphatic sense in the cases of Rousseau and Goethe was derived not from the mirroring of author and audience but from the experience of rupture between the two. Finally, part 3, "Imagined Communities and the Mobilization of a Critical Public," explores the possibilities of different kinds of publics setting aside their own self-interest in favor of the common good. Von Mücke traces a movement away from identificatory and nationalist potentials (represented by Abbt), toward a community (following Herder, Kant, and Lessing) of extra-institutional participants in a public sphere that transcends the hierarchies and authority structures of church, state, and educational institutions. In her conclusion, von Mücke speaks of "audiences and publics . . . made up out of atomistic individuals," whose primary "communal bond" lies no longer in religion but in "the domain of art" (242).

With respect to the wider contemporary relevance of von Mücke's findings, I would point to the overall sympathy with which she presents these various "practices of the Enlightenment." I do not mean this as a criticism, but as a way of calling attention to important questions that remain somewhat implicit. For example, the language of "atomistic individuals" inevitably carries with it the specter of alienation, and the valorization of an ethics of mindfulness and attentiveness will probably encounter resistance from readers for whom "contemplative" modes seem politically insufficient. More crucial, however, is the question of what has happened to art and aesthetics in the last three hundred years. Here I would probably take a dimmer view than von Mücke does, but the condemnation of "the ideology of the aesthetic" is in itself nothing new, and her work has the great value of forcing more careful differentiation within what is often loosely called "aesthetics," in order to ascertain precisely what may be valuable and worth salvaging. The study's detailed focus on the disciplines of attentiveness also risks coming across as conservative in an era when mass distraction is considered normal and the crisis of the humanities is being attested to in many quarters. Assuming that this is a possible context in which to think about von Mücke's "practices," she may be read as provocatively asking and answering the following questions: What in this tradition is worth conserving? Precisely which practices must be cultivated and defended?

Finally, it is worth noting that the publication year of *The Practices of the Enlightenment* is 2015, and that presumably it was written in the preceding years, in which it was still possible to invoke "The Arab Spring[, which] depended on the interrelationship of social media and the gathering of real people in real spaces[,]" against "technological determinism . . . whether print [in the eighteenth century] or electronic in the age of the Internet" (218). Not that anyone in academia can be expected to have anticipated the fundamental shift in the public sphere that was

ushered in by the age of Trump and so-called fake news. This shift itself is not novel, but can be understood through theories of ideology, disinformation, propaganda, and mass delusion. This more pessimistic mood of 2017, with respect to the legacy of the Enlightenment, represents a profound challenge that von Mücke's relatively optimistic reading must face. She is, however, far from alone in this regard. She is in the company of everyone for whom the term "Enlightenment" still has meaning.

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Alessa Johns, *Bluestocking Feminism and British-German Cultural Transfer, 1750–1837* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014). Pp. xiv + 242. \$30.00.

This volume comprises a series of four studies exploring the impact of transnationalism on proto-feminist thought from the mid-eighteenth century to the early Victorian period. Its methodological framework draws on Bruno Latour's actor-network theory, which author Alessa Johns extends with her own geographic metaphor, *terrains vastes*. For Johns, Latour's actor-network theory offers "a more heterogeneous and inclusive model of connections and activity" (14). It opens up *terrains vastes* by decentering historiography away from the canonical authors of national traditions and encouraging an exploration of actors on the peripheries of historical change, particularly women and transnational intellectuals.

Chapter 1 focuses on the efforts of two learned women, so-called blue-stockings, to promote cultural transfer between Britain and German-speaking lands through the eighteenth-century book trade. The first, Anna Vandenhoeck, was an Englishwoman who owned and operated a publishing house serving the University of Göttingen, a major center of German Enlightenment thought. Vandenhoeck "supported the translation of significant British publications, encouraged British journals through a reading circle, and offered great numbers of British volumes, in the original and in translation, for sale at her shop" (37). The second woman, Duchess Philippine Charlotte of Brunswick-Wolfenbüttel, amassed a 4,000-volume library that was "wide-ranging, cosmopolitan, and women-oriented" (31). For Johns, the activities and intellectual preoccupations of these women demonstrate a "quotidian rather than transcendent cosmopolitanism," in which "gender position can trump rigid national and social identities" (38). The case studies are intriguing, and Johns's attempt to highlight the depth of women's gender identification in the eighteenth century provides an important impulse for further research on proto-feminist solidarity and political engagement.

Chapter 2 examines the role of translation in the transfer of proto-feminist thought between Britain and German-speaking Europe. Johns focuses on four works in particular: Johann David Michaelis's translation of Richardson's *Clarissa* (1748), Meta Forkel's of Paine's *The Rights of Man* (1791), Mary Wollstonecraft's of Salzmann's *Moralisches Elementarbuch* (1795), and Joseph Johnson's of GutsMuths's *Gymnastik für die Jugend* (1793). For Johns, Michaelis and Forkel demonstrate how English-German translations successfully furthered the cultural, social, and political advancement of women, whereas Wollstonecraft actually serves as a negative foil. Johns convincingly argues that the latter's "Englishing" of Salzmann's