

**PUBLIC VOICES, PUBLIC SELVES: SELF-FASHIONING AND GENDER  
IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY**

Dissertation Proposal

by

FirstName MiddleName LastName

Month DD, YYYY

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Dr. Gerald Soliday, Chair

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Dr. Daniel Wickberg

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Dr. Pamela Gossin

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Dr. Patricia Michaelson

## **Public Voices, Public Selves Self-Fashioning and Gender in the Eighteenth Century**

Over the past three decades women's history has developed from a marginal topic into an accepted, even expected, approach to the study of the past. Along the way, historians from Gerda Lerner and Joan Scott onward have grappled with how exactly to write history that includes women. Some historians have focused on what Lerner calls "compensatory history," exploring the actions and experiences of exceptional, notable women. Others have focused on "contribution history," history that looks at the ways in which women contributed to the historical narrative we already know. Both approaches have been criticized, the first for focusing on women who were, by definition, not representative of some hypothetical "average" woman's experiences, and the second for accepting a historical narrative that portrays women's history as separate from and marginal to real or important history. With the increasing emphasis on gender rather than women some of those issues have been resolved, notably the need to consider women in relation to, and as part of, the rest of the world, rather than isolated from it. On the other hand, gender studies have tended to increase the focus on the relative power relations between men and women while consistently assuming gender as a distinguishable and relevant category (see, as examples, Fletcher and Wiesner). 

Many writers have explored the fluidity of identity and self during the eighteenth century, and there is a consensus (among scholars such as Shoemaker, Stone, Todd, and Wahrman) that gendered identities in particular went through serious changes during the period.  There has been heated discussion about what those changes were, what they meant, and even when exactly they occurred. Did the industrial revolution and the growth of the public sphere mean that women were locked into docile and demure domesticity, were the changes mostly rhetorical and women's lives go on much as before, did a group of women actually engineer a position of

**Comment [ # 1]:** Describes the major relevant studies and scholars in women's history, including the criticisms these scholars have received. Supplies background information on developments in this field.

**Comment [ # 2]:** Focuses on the concept of identity in women's history. This focus also indicates that the writer will probably deal with this concept in proposed dissertation.

domestic moral superiority to create a platform for public debate? Were changed gender roles a result, at least in England, of anxiety created after the former colonies in America declared independence and thereby questioned the very core of national identity (Vickery, Bannet, Gallagher, Wahrman)? **III**

Even those writers who argue in favor of women being actively involved in the formation of gender roles and identity seem to assume that for women as a group, being women was the defining element of their identities. As Nina Baym put it, “all current [feminist] theory requires sexual difference as its ground.” She was writing over twenty years ago, but on this particular issue little seems to have changed. For research purposes, women in history have been defined by their gender as categorically as any legal disposal of them as *femes covert* ever managed.

Assuming gender to be the defining element of women’s identity is a useful way to learn something about what women as a group experienced and how women as a group were experienced—clearly all women shared certain experiences, expectations and legal restrictions. However, understanding the implications of the structural position of “woman” does not necessarily tell us anything about how individual women negotiated their environment. Nor does it help us understand how particular women could defy society’s expectations; much less how segments of society could accept and even embrace public acts of disobedience against prescribed behavior. **IV**

Beyond understanding how notions of gender shifted over time, and beyond exploring how women (and men) adapted the way they framed their actions to fit those shifts, it is relevant to ask what role gender played in the construction and presentation of self. I want to explore whether gender really was a primary category of identity on which everything else was

**Comment [ # 3]:** Summarizes major directions in the field concerning the concept of identity. Note that it is generally preferred for these types of summaries to be expressed in declarative sentences (rather than as questions).

**Comment [ # 4]:** Addresses the problems in using gender as the defining element of women’s identity. Introduces the reader to the limitations of such an approach. In this way, the writer indirectly provides a justification of purpose or an argument for the relevance of this dissertation.

dependent, or whether, as I suspect, it was a negotiable category, sometimes important and sometimes subordinate to other priorities. **V**

In the first part of my dissertation I will set out the public expectations for women in general in eighteenth-century England and what current research says about women's actual behavior (e.g., Backscheider, Jones, Turner), to highlight the tension between the prescribed ideal (the structural expectations) and the actual practices of women in the public sphere. **VI**

To explore how individual women negotiated and presented public selves and dealt with their gender, I will then look at the writings of a group of women (one American, the others English) who, in different ways, flouted gendered expectations to claim a voice in the public sphere. **VII** In order of birth date they are Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, Elizabeth Montagu, Catharine Macaulay, and Mercy Otis Warren. I will do a close reading of their texts ranging from private and public correspondence to essays, pamphlets, and published books, in order to examine the different tropes the authors made use of to create legitimate public voices and to chart how (and to what extent) they related to the issue of their gender.<sup>1</sup>

**VIII** After a comparison of their strategies I will examine the texts of some of the women's contemporaries to get an idea of how their respective strategies of self-presentation were received. I will survey what strategies seem to have been accepted by the women's readers and correspondents and what claims to legitimacy were rejected and on what grounds. I will pay particular attention to whether gender consistently appears as a primary category of evaluation or whether it was perhaps a negotiable issue, for instance more important for critics than sympathetic readers (see for instance, Burke's references to Macaulay as a "Republican Virago"). I will also attempt to determine to what extent the women under consideration appear

**Comment [ # 5]:** – The writer presents the original questions that will drive the work, but does not immediately state an argument. Still, it is clear that the argument will emerge from this inquiry about the role of gender in women's identities.

In some proposals, the writers might not feel confident formulating an argument because they are at the beginning of their research. This tactic can be acceptable, but it is then necessary to have a well-defined, intellectual question (or questions) that will guide the author's reading, research, and writing.

**Comment [ # 6]:** Situates this investigation within existing scholarship and indicates its contribution to the field.

**Comment [ # 7]:** Begins to outline the dissertation's proposed structure.

**Comment [ # 8]:** Lists the primary sources to be consulted, as well as describing the methodology to be employed when using and analyzing these sources.

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<sup>1</sup> Many of the letters are published, as are their other writings. What is not published can be found in manuscripts in archives or libraries located in New York, Boston, and London.

to have modified their strategies depending on the reaction of their audience (making their public selves even more of a collaborative and fluid construct) and to what extent they resisted external attempts at definition.

The women whose writings and public selves I have chosen to explore were active mostly during the eighteenth century and were established as writers and speakers in the public sphere in England or the Early American Republic. **IX** I picked women whose contributions to public discourse were clearly in ostensibly male genres; women who at least in part established their public position based on nonfiction writing. I made this decision because it appears that the spectacular success of female novelists during the second half of the century made fiction a more ambiguous sphere and because women who wrote primarily on the topic of women leave open issues of audience and sphere of discourse. Women who engaged in genres of public discourse such as politics, history, moral philosophy, and theology were reaching out to a broader, mostly male, and more unambiguously public readership than women who wrote texts only for private consumption. Another criterion was the availability of both public and private writing, to provide examples both of direct appeals to their public and more private or indirect presentations of self.

**X** Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689–1762) was a prolific writer of poems, of historical narratives and, especially, of letters. During her lifetime her official publication was limited, but it is clear that she intended her letters to be widely read and she was involved in several public writing endeavors (a collaboration on poetry with Alexander Pope, an article for Addison's *Spectator*, etc.) She organized, and prepared for publication after her death, a collection of letters written as she accompanied her husband on his travels as the Ambassador to Turkey. She brought back from her Turkish venture the practice of smallpox vaccination that she introduced to England (decades before Edward Jenner popularized vaccination with cowpox). Her interests,

**Comment [ # 9 ]:** Provides the reasoning behind the choice of this particular group of sources. This serves to justify the choices and explain the limits of the investigation.

**Comment [ # 10 ]:** Introduces the authors of the primary sources and gives the hypothesis. This hypothesis could have been stated earlier in the proposal.

as she puts it in a letter to the Abbé Conti, spanned “from religion to tulips” (Montagu, *Letters* 178), and she is sometimes described as an amateur anthropologist, strongly concerned with the relationship between cultural traditions and human nature.

Elizabeth Montagu (1720–1800), married to a nephew of Lady Mary, was a hostess, literary critic, and writer who helped organize and lead London’s bluestocking society. She came from money and her husband was wealthy. After his death she managed her money well enough to become one of the wealthiest women of her time. Her salon was frequented by, among others, Samuel Johnson, Sir Joshua Reynolds, Edmund Burke, David Garrick, and Horace Walpole. She was a patron of a number of writers including Hannah More, Frances Burney, Anna Barbauld, Sarah Fielding, and Anna Williams, and herself published a piece of literary criticism entitled *An Essay on the Writings and Genius of Shakespear*. She was also a prolific letter writer.

Mercy Otis Warren (1728 –1814) was born and lived all her life in Massachusetts. She was a playwright, poet, and historian who was very active in the ideological debate surrounding the American declaration of independence. In addition to writing satirical plays, poems, political pamphlets, and a history of the American Revolution, she corresponded with many of the founding fathers—her private writings include letters to and from Jefferson, Hamilton, Franklin, and both John and Abigail Adams.

Catharine Macaulay (1731–1791) was a historian like Warren, and indeed the two were friends and correspondents. Macaulay’s *History of England* was immensely popular during her lifetime and was seen as a radical alternative to the politically conservative history published by David Hume. Macaulay was a staunch advocate of liberal political principles; she sparred with Hume and wrote a spirited defense of the French Revolution in response to Burke’s *Reflections*.

I am considering for inclusion the philosophers Catherine Trotter Cockburn (1679–1749) and Mary Astell (1666-1739). Both Cockburn and Trotter wrote on religious topics and were politically conservative, and therefore, at least on the surface, even less likely than the previous four women to challenge societal norms by participation in public sphere. Catherine Trotter Cockburn was also a novelist and playwright. Her *Defence of Mr. Locke's Essay* earned her the appreciation of Locke himself and the admiration of Leibnitz. In the *Defence* she argues that Locke's epistemology sufficiently accounts for the origin of moral concepts and refutes charges that Locke's theories exclude the possibility of immortality. Mary Astell was a high Tory Anglican and believer in the divine rights of kings. Her political conservatism did not keep her from propounding some quite radical ideas about education for women in *A Serious Proposal for the Ladies*. Her correspondence with the Cambridge Platonist John Norris was published at his insistence as *Letters Concerning the Love of God*.

XI All of the women whose writings I explore came from the gentry, although their fortunes varied. They were all better educated than most women of their time, although some had been educated by their families and others were self-taught. All of them, except Mary Astell, were married, although some wrote as wives and others only as widows. They all established an active, legitimate public voice in fields that were considered outside the scope of female activity, in subject areas that spanned from political theory and history to theology, moral philosophy, and literary analysis. My hypothesis is that the tropes they used to establish their public voices were as varied as their individual circumstances and, furthermore, that each writer used different tropes at different times and adapted her story depending on the reaction she got from her readers and correspondents.

**Comment [ # 11]:** Provides the reasoning behind the choice of this particular group of sources. This serves to justify the choices and explain the limits of the investigation.

In “The Self-Fashionings of Olympe de Gouges” Gregory Brown explores how the playwright and later abolitionist constructed and modified a public self depending on what aspect, what category of her personality seemed most useful at any given time. Thus, she would at times address the world in terms of being a writer with certain connections, at times make her plea as a vulnerable woman, and yet at other times simply describe herself in terms of an outsider. **XII** I expect to find a similar variety of strategies and constructed public selves, each molded to fit the individual needs and possibilities of each woman, some tropes heavily dependent on gender identity (either leaning on or excusing it) and other tropes marginalizing or ignoring gender completely.

**Comment [ # 12]:** Restates the goal of the project.

In addition to illuminating how the individual women negotiated their public selves and used, ignored, or “overcame” their gender, I hope to demonstrate the need for gender studies that explore gender differences without assuming that gender was always a stable or even relevant aspect of the presentation of self. Janet Todd has shown how women writers in the early modern period displayed different “signs” representing themselves, depending on what their environment expected and demanded of them at different times. I suggest that whereas some of those signs only differed in how they reflected the gender of their writers, other signs did not rely on gender as an identifying marker at all. “Gender” remains an indispensable category for historical study, but much remains to be done in order to determine how relevant a category it was at different points in time to the lives of individual women in history.

**XIII** Several aspects of my academic history have helped to prepare me for this project. An undergraduate degree in English Literature with a focus on the period 1550-1900 gives me a foundation in textual analysis and the literary environment I will be exploring. A Master’s degree in Humanities, with a focus on social and political theory and cultural anthropology, has given

**Comment [ # 13]:** By describing educational background and preparation, the writer demonstrates that this project is practicable and that the writer has the credentials to successfully complete it.

me a broad understanding of culture as something heterogeneous and contested and has prepared me to explore the tension between individual agency and social construction of self. Doctoral study focused on the cultural and intellectual history of early modern Europe has given me the requisite period background and exposed me to the historiographical debates in the field.

**XIV** To assist me in further research and preparation of this dissertation, I have asked the following faculty members to serve on my committee. Dr. Gerald Soliday, associate professor of historical studies, teaches early modern European social and cultural history, including the social history of literature. His knowledge of historical developments during the period as well as his clear understanding of both the methodological and the interpretive issues involved will be invaluable to my work. Dr. Daniel Wickberg, associate professor of historical studies, teaches American and European intellectual history. His insights into the intellectual environment of early modern England and America will be of particular help to me, especially for the colonial section of the research. Dr. Pamela Gossin, associate professor of literary and historical studies, teaches classes on early modern professional women and auto/biographical writing. Her experience in both of these fields as well as her interdisciplinary approach will be particularly useful to me as I explore the use of letters, pamphlets and treatises as auto/biographical narratives. Dr. Patricia Michaelson, associate professor in literature, teaches courses on eighteenth-century women writers in England. Her understanding of the period, in terms of literary trends and the general cultural environment, will contribute greatly to my research.

**Comment [ # 14]:** The writer lists the committee members, clearly highlighting the relevance of the committee members' expertise for the proposed dissertation.

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