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The Digital Encyclopedia of British Sociability in the Long Eighteenth Century

## Essay periodical

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### Abstract

The rise of the leisure press after 1690 caused the appearance of new forms of middle-class sociability. The tea-table is a case in point, around which the two sexes gathered, read periodical essays together, which provided subject matter to polite conversation. Periodicals, however, also staged new forms of sociability in their columns, constructing communities of readers which they endeavoured to instruct and educate. Periodical essayists promoted a Whig reformist agenda, which dictated new forms of sociability along gender lines. They projected an ideal of reasonable femininity which largely restricted female sociability to the domestic sphere. This model proved so hegemonic that it became difficult for later female journalists to discard it.

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## Gendered sociability in the English periodical essay

While seventeenth-century English newspapers and the political press were largely associated with male [coffeehouse](#) sociability – customers could read the papers for the price of a cup of coffee – the leisure press which emerged after 1689 in the form of the periodical essay and prevailed in the first half of the eighteenth century, staged and gave birth to new forms of mixed sociability based on gender balance and politeness.

Essay [periodicals](#), which could be dailies like *The Spectator* (1711-1712/1714) or *The Guardian* (1713), bi-weeklies like *The Free-Thinker* (1718-1721), or yet triweeklies like *The Tatler* (1709-1711) or *The Lover* (1714) were not only available in coffeehouses but also through private subscriptions. Women, who were barred access to coffeehouses, could therefore read them at home. Their literacy and purchasing power were improving fast. *The Spectator* for instance invited female readers to devote a daily quarter of an hour to reading the paper, claiming that it would later conveniently ‘furnish tea table talk.’<sup>1</sup>

The phrase itself shows the intimate relationship the *Spectator*’s authors wished to establish between reading such ephemeral prints and shaping people’s social behaviours. Reading periodicals was conceived as an essentially collective activity. It was often performed aloud to a small audience whether in the coffeehouse or at home. First and foremost, each issue was expected to be commented upon and therefore served to popularize and redefine emerging, fashionable group activities such as tea or coffee drinking. Taking [tea](#) was a genteel form of sociability which became increasingly associated with femininity as the eighteenth-century unfolded. Its prestige was derived from the material cost and [exoticism](#) of tea and of tea sets. Yet, writers of essay periodicals often blamed it for encouraging idleness. They endeavoured to upgrade it to a more highbrow and moral form of sociability ; one which, thanks to their essays, combined entertainment and moral didacticism. It included literary and aesthetic conversation, as opposed to gossip. *The Free-Thinker* (1718-1721), a bi-weekly essay paper coedited by the poet Ambrose Philips and a circle of Hanoverian Whigs, typically ambited to teach the readers of both sexes how to ‘philosophize’,<sup>2</sup> a term which meant both to ponder philosophically but also to exchange about philosophy with other people. It therefore popularised the Cartesian and Lockean philosophies, claiming that they constituted the core principles of polite conversation understood as sociability.

The move was in itself paradoxical. Periodicals claimed to improve upper-class forms of sociability by displacing their value from the luxurious material objects which had occasioned them, – the tea sets – to cheap yet enlightening prints<sup>3</sup> which would turn each tea /coffee table assembly into exclusive circles reminiscent of the seventeenth-century French [salons](#). Doing so, they highlighted that the core tenets of sociability – politeness and conversation<sup>4</sup> – could in fact be practised *without* the luxurious paraphernalia of tea by the upper and middling ranks and could be a popular pedagogical instrument.

That papers favoured mixed sociability is confirmed by the very format of the journals. Periodical essays were commonly headed by untranslated Latin and Greek mottos, which created a sense of belonging to a reading community sharing the same culture. At the same time, since the mottos offered a further comment on the essays' topics, they introduced several levels of understanding of the essays. They reflected the subtle distinctions of ranks and intellectual authority. While male readers had easy access to all levels of meanings and could discuss them, female readers, who were rarely literate in the classical languages, constituted a separate community of readers who could socialise with the main group only up to a certain extent. Yet, the lack of translation could also be a strategy to trigger and cement social relationships between the less educated and the more enlightened readers, with the latter explaining the meaning to the former.

The community of readers was doubled by the creation of a mixed community of correspondents who were invited to write to the editors either to respond to the topics developed by the journals or to offer new essays. Epistolarity was one way of staging and enforcing harmonious sociability. The journals often mixed genuine letters and forged ones ; *The Spectator* banned gossip and personal satire<sup>5</sup> while *The Free-Thinker* fixed the rules of controversy and debates by forbidding personal abuses and misuse of words.<sup>6</sup>

In addition, some of the papers were explicitly fashioned as the produce of polite sociability: some personas – fictional editors like Isaac Bickerstaff in *The Tatler* - allegedly wrote their columns from coffeehouses and used coffeehouse conversation topics and rumours as a source of inspiration. Other papers like *The Female Tatler* (1709-1710) or *The Lover* could transcribe the conversations of a fictitious team of writers meeting in a club.

It is noteworthy that translating the sociability of clubs onto paper could eventually serve as a pedagogical model for European elite sociability. This is evidenced by the Swiss Société du comte de la Lippe, a club of erudites meeting every saturday in Lausanne in the 1740s in order to perfect the education of the young German Count of Lippe Detmold. Its distinguished members commented on various political and philosophical works, which included some of the essays of *The Spectator* and *Guardian*.<sup>7</sup>

Many of the most famous early leisure essay periodicals (those of Addison and Steele and their circle of friends) promoted an ideal of sociability which, they claimed, was essentially commercial. Essay journals were commercial ventures offering guidance about how to interact harmoniously with others. They spread the idea that the language of social harmony and virtue was intimately related to that of credit and exchange. Defining sociability as a commercial activity was therefore a political move. Papers suggested that those who had contributed to turning Britain into a modern and prosperous parliamentary monarchy after the 1689 revolution were mostly the urban, professional, banking, upper and middle ranks which had financially supported the new regime. In other words they claimed that true male sociability was socially mixed, British, urban, and Whig.<sup>8</sup>

Essay periodical also defined commercial sociability in a broader sense that included moral and social issues. Following the moral agenda of the emerging Societies for the Reformation of Manners, journals had an Augustinian vision of society. They believed it to be corrupt and in need of moral reformation. Purporting to improve manners by promoting heightened morality, the periodicals dictated what the acceptable forms of sociability were and which ones should be banned. New forms of public sociability such as [masquerading](#) were repeatedly described as dangerous and scandalous because disguise gave too many freedoms to the sexes. *The Spectator* consistently satirised lower-rank male clubbing in essays on the two-penny club,<sup>9</sup> the ugly club,<sup>10</sup> etc., laughing at the aspirations and vanity of their members who foolishly aped elite and political institutions like the [Kit Cat](#) or the October clubs.

On the whole, the Whig journals' prescriptive agenda tended to frame sociability along gender lines. In *The Spectator*, men's and women's sociabilities were dictated by what was believed to be their respective and complementary nature. Masculinity was defined as strong, learned and public while femininity was largely characterised as beautiful, fragile, sensitive and naturally caring. Combined with natural good sense, these respective qualities would enable men to socialise outside the family and manage their affairs in the coffeehouses or in the parliament, while 'Fair sexing it'<sup>11</sup> enabled journals to construct ideal feminine sociability as essentially domestic, private and rural; ladies were expected to exercise their social skill within the narrow family sphere with their spouse, children and servants. The household was depicted as a sort of happy and apolitical commonwealth.<sup>12</sup>

The papers often relied on character sketches to condemn the fashionable forms of sociability of upper-class women. For example, Fulvia 'thinks life lost in her own Family, and fancies her self out of the World when she is not in the Ring, the Play-House, or the Drawing-Room. [...] The missing of an Opera the first Night, would be more afflicting to her than the Death of a Child.'<sup>13</sup>

Such forms of public sociability were also condemned for encouraging women to confuse sociability with publicity and ultimately with political proselytism. Ladies who displayed their political opinions on their fans or with their face patches<sup>14</sup> at the opera were charged with renouncing their natural qualities of meekness and with being animated by their passions. Their inadequate public sociability threatened the new political order because they would often end up adopting anti-social behaviours (losing their temper in public over political issues, or becoming coquettes in order to gain admirers to their cause).

The papers promised to be particularly useful to women readers by enlightening them on how to achieve polite, domestic sociability, and by offering them, a semi-private safe space where to socialise through epistolarity and where to find moral guidance.

The construction of sociability in and by *The Tatler*, *The Spectator* and their followers was therefore ambiguous because it was both an instrument of intellectual empowerment likely to soften and enrich social interaction, and, at least for women, a tool meant to restrict female

social practice within private, apolitical bounds.

This Whig ideal of polite sociability was so influential that it made it difficult for women journalists to offer an alternative definition. The main reason was that the ideal of female domestic sociability deprived women writers who sought to deal with matters unrelated with the private sphere of their authority. Since respectable ladies were not expected to be in contact with political or even economic forms of sociability, those who did were considered abnormal, unnatural females whose sociability was flawed from the start. This explains why by 1740 there were only three short-lived essay periodicals which used a female persona ; the two *Female Tatlers*<sup>15</sup> and the *Parrot* (1728) by Mrs Prattle. The latter, who declared ‘Scandal is the woman’s weapon’<sup>16</sup> and vindicated women’s right to write scathing political satires against Walpole’s government clearly challenged the conversational model of virtuous female sociability promoted by Whig essay periodicals. It is highly meaningful that these three Tory journals sought to subvert the Whig doctrine precisely by assaulting the journalistic rhetoric of female virtuous sociability. They thus debunked the hypocritical foundation of Whig politeness and sociability which was so powerfully staged by the press.

The model of polite female sociability was so hegemonic that when, later, female journalists like Eliza Haywood in her *Female Spectator* (1744-1746) sought to gain authorial authority by heading their magazines with a female persona, one essential precondition was to construct their journal as spaces promoting and defending private respectable female sociability.

1. The Spectator n° 4, ed D. F. Bond (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965, 5 vols.) vol. 1, p. 21.
2. The Free-Thinker n° 147 (London, 1722), vol. 3, p. 308.
3. Periodicals cost one penny before the 1712 Act imposed a stamp duty which subsequently doubled their price.
4. See The Tatler n° 225, ed. Donald F. Bond (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987, 3 vols.), vol. 3, p. 172.
5. The Spectator n° 16, vol. 1, pp. 71-72.
6. The Free-Thinker n° 26, vol. 1, p. 180.
7. Claire Boulard Jouslin, ‘Joseph Addison in Lausanne: Reading Addison’s works at the Société du Comte de la Lippe,’ in Claire Boulard Jouslin and Klaus-Dieter Ertler (ed.), Addison and Europe (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2020), pp. 163-177.
8. As opposed to the landed elite and freeholders who had the reputation of being Tories.
9. The Spectator n° 9, vol. 1, p. 43.
10. The Spectator n° 17, vol. 1, pp.74-76.
11. Jonathan Swift coined the phrase in his Journal to Stella : ‘I’ll not meddle with the Spectator – let him fair-sex it to the world’s end.’
12. The Spectator n° 15, vol. 1, p. 68: Aurelia embodies that kind of sociability in essay 15.
13. The Spectator n° 15, vol. 1, p. 69.
14. The Spectator n° 81, vol. 1, p. 348.
15. The first one was written by a persona named Mrs Crackenthorpe (1709) ; its continuation (1709-1710) was allegedly written by a club of six ladies who were in reality the playwright Suzanna Centlivre and the philosopher Bernard Mandeville.

## Cite this article

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