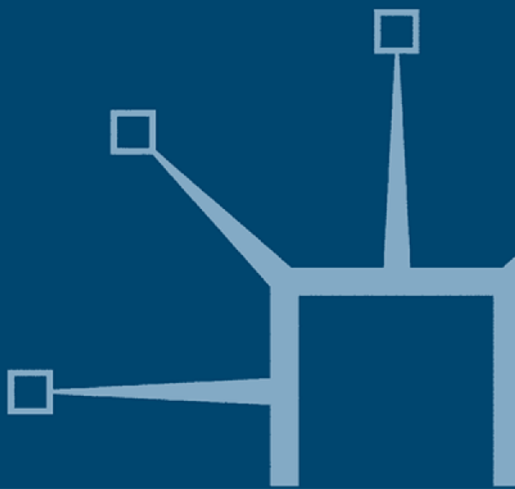


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Bluestockings

Women of Reason from Enlightenment to
Romanticism

Elizabeth Eger



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Series Standing Order ISBN 978–1–4039–3408–6 hardback
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Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 2010 978-0-230-20533-8

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First published 2010 by
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN

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Palgrave Macmillan in the US is a division of St Martin's Press LLC, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

Palgrave Macmillan is the global academic imprint of the above companies and has companies and representatives throughout the world.

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ISBN 978-1-349-30194-2 ISBN 978-0-230-25050-5 (eBook)

DOI 10.1057/9780230250505

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
19 18 17 16 15 14 13 12 11 10

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all those who have helped me with this project. Marilyn Butler, Peter de Bolla and the late Mary Macrae were inspirational teachers at critical points and I am extremely grateful for their encouragement. In particular I want to thank Annie Janowitz for her generosity and guidance in all that matters. I would also like to thank many colleagues and friends for their advice and help: Danielle Allen, Maxine Berg, Clare Brant, Susan Carlile, Kate Chisholm, Norma Clarke, Emma Clery, Markman Ellis, Emma Francis, Heather Glen, Charlotte Grant, Judith Hawley, Gary Kelly, Larry Klein, Devoney Looser, Jo McDonagh, Jon Mee, Anne Mellor, Marilyn Morris, Felicity Nussbaum, Karen O'Brien, Lucy Peltz, Barbara Placido, Nicole Pohl, Leah Price, Kate Retford, Betty Schellenberg, Lydia Syson, Neil Vickers and Sue Wiseman. I would like to thank my PhD examiners Isobel Armstrong and Simon Jarvis, and the anonymous readers of the manuscript for Palgrave, for all their invaluable suggestions in improving the text. Many thanks are due to the editorial team at Palgrave: Paula Kennedy, Steven Hall and Barbara Slater.

I am very grateful to King's College Cambridge, who funded my graduate research (from which this book derives). Later I was extremely fortunate to have research fellowships at the University of Warwick, working on 'The Luxury Project', and at the University of Liverpool. I would like to thank all my present colleagues in the English department at King's College London for their support.

Fittingly enough for a book about bluestockings, I have been sustained by various intellectual networks, including the Cambridge Conference Collective (Charlotte Grant, Cliona Ó Gallchoir and Penny Warburton); the Feminism and Enlightenment Project, run by Barbara Taylor and Sarah Knott; the Enlightenment and Romanticism Reading Group in the Institute of English Studies, Senate House; and my students, particularly Clare Barlow and Fiona Ritchie.

I am very grateful to Maggie Powell of the Walpole Library, University of Yale, and to Roy Ritchie of the Huntington Library, California, who granted me two fellowships that were crucial to my research, and to the staff of the British Library, the London Library, and the Maughan Library at King's College London. Celia Joicey at the National Portrait Gallery helped me with pictures, and I'd like to express my thanks to all at the NPG, where Lucy Peltz and I worked on the exhibition, 'Brilliant Women: 18th Century Bluestockings', March–June 2008.

Parts of this book have appeared, in earlier versions, in *Women, Writing, and the Public Sphere, 1700–1830*, eds Elizabeth Eger, Charlotte Grant, Cliona Ó Gallchoir and Penny Warburton (Cambridge, 2000), *Reconsidering the Bluestockings*, eds Nicole Pohl and Betty Schellenberg (San Marino, California: Huntington Library, 2003) and *Women, Gender and Enlightenment*, eds Sarah Knott and Barbara Taylor (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005). I am grateful to the relevant editors for their critical input and for permission to include the material here. I would also like to thank the Huntington Library for permission to quote extensively from the manuscript collection of Elizabeth Montagu's correspondence.

My greatest debt is to the love, friendship and conversation of my family. My parents, Selina and John, inspired my sister, Helen, and me with a love of books and paintings from early on. More recently, my children, Emily and James, have provided happy distraction. Nick has always found time to listen, read and encourage. I could not have completed this book without him.

List of Abbreviations

- MO From manuscript collection of Montagu's letters at the Huntington Library, San Marino, California, USA
- MMEM Matthew Montagu, ed., *The Letters of Elizabeth Montagu, with Some of the Letters of her Correspondents*, 4 vols (London: Printed for T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1809–1813)
- Clim Emily Climenson, *Elizabeth Montagu, The Queen of the Bluestockings: Her Correspondence from 1720 to 1761*, 2 vols (London: John Murray, 1906)
- Blunt Blunt, Reginald, ed., *Mrs Montagu, 'Queen of the Blues': Her Letters and Friendships from 1762 to 1800*, 2 vols (London: Constable, 1923)

Textual Note on Elizabeth Montagu's Correspondence

My book draws widely upon the substantial body of surviving correspondence between Elizabeth Montagu and her circle, held by the Huntington Library in California.¹ The collection consists of nearly seven thousand letters to and from Montagu, and provides an invaluable record of the social and intellectual relationships between men and women in this period. The Montagu Collection is unlike most preserved archives in that it often contains both sides of a correspondence, allowing the reader to eavesdrop on literary conversations or witness business transactions in full detail. While over half the letters are written by Montagu herself, the collection also contains those written to her by her wider circle of friends, providing a fascinating cross-section of English literary, social and political life. In addition to Montagu's letters to her sister Sarah Scott, her husband Edward Montagu and her closest friend Elizabeth Carter, there are several to and from Margaret Bentinck, Duchess of Portland, Frances Boscawen, George, Lord Lyttelton, Messenger Monsey, William Pulteney, Earl of Bath, Elizabeth Vesey, Gilbert West and William Wilberforce. There are also single or few pieces penned by other prominent figures in her world: Edmund Burke, Hester Chapone, Thomas Clarkson, David Garrick, Samuel Johnson, Hannah More, Hester Thrale Piozzi, Sir Joshua Reynolds, Laurence Sterne, James Stuart and Horace Walpole. The correspondence is wide-ranging and provides evidence for several veins of enquiry into eighteenth-century cultural life, encompassing the broad fields of literary, political and social history but also addressing such specific matters as foreign travel, medicine, and the management of Montagu's country estate, coal mines and town houses. The collection contains several letters either by or concerning Montagu's servants and objects of patronage, individuals such as James Woodhouse (Montagu's steward at her Berkshire estate) and the milkwoman Anne Yearsley, both aspiring poets from the labouring classes.

Following her death in 1800, Montagu's executor and nephew Matthew Montagu decided to solicit the return of her letters from many of their recipients (or their descendants) and published a selection of her correspondence written between 1734 and 1761: *The Letters of Mrs. Elizabeth Montagu, with Some of the Letters of her Correspondents* (London, 1809 and 1813). However, his editorial standards were very much of their time and his selections guided by a different moral climate. Comparison between his selection and the original manuscripts reveals his editorial policy to be cautious in the face of his aunt's more passionate epistles to Elizabeth Carter, for example,

and he also omits details regarding her income and her relationship to her husband which might be of interest to today's reader. However, he does convey a strong sense of his aunt's childhood in Cambridgeshire, where she spent a great deal of her time with Conyers Middleton, her maternal step-grandfather, a Cambridge don and author of a life of Cicero.

Matthew Montagu's edition of his aunt's letters was revised and supplemented by his granddaughter Emily J. Climenson, in 1906. Climenson was somewhat in love with her great-great-aunt's reputation, if overwhelmed by the task of selecting individual examples from such a vast collection. She left the editing of the later letters to her friend, Reginald Blunt, who admitted initial reluctance to take on the task. However, he was eventually won over by the sheer variety and vivacity of his subject. Both he and Climenson offer a useful view into the social world Montagu inhabited, concentrating on her connections with the worlds of fashion, politics and nobility. However, their tendency to cut the letters randomly and often brutally prevents the reader from appreciating Montagu's more measured tone of thought and her literary self-consciousness in addressing her chosen correspondents. In my own selection of her letters included in this book I preserve their integrity, spelling and punctuation as far as possible in order to present a clearer picture of Montagu's epistolary style and to suggest the diversity of her responsibilities.

Note

1. For a succinct overview of the history and provenance of the collection, see Mary L. Robertson, 'The Elizabeth Robinson Montagu Collection at the Huntington Library', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 65(1 & 2) (2002): 21–3.

Introduction: *The Nine Living Muses of Great Britain*

The Nine Living Muses of Great Britain, painted by Richard Samuel and exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1779, forms the central motif of this book, which considers the cultural history and group identity of women's literary and intellectual activity between 1750 and 1812. Samuel's 'muses' were Elizabeth Montagu, Elizabeth Griffith, Elizabeth Carter, Charlotte Lennox, Elizabeth Linley, Angelica Kauffman, Catharine Macaulay, Anna Barbauld and Hannah More (see Plate 1). Together they formed an important network of intellectuals who were involved in a diverse range of cultural activities, from writing poetry, political pamphlets, educational and moral philosophy, legal essays, novels, plays and Shakespeare criticism to performing arias and exhibiting paintings. Their portrait celebrates the relationship between the arts along the lines of the classical humanist model of a harmonious society, capturing the moment when English women as a group first gained acceptance as powerful contributors to the artistic world.

Exhibited at a transitional moment in history, poised between Enlightenment and Romantic aesthetics, Samuel's painting brings together two literary generations, 'living muses', while also placing them in the timeless realm of mythological representation. The painting joins the real and symbolic figures of women to form a model of civilization for the public consumer of art. It is arguable that such a convergence occurs only at historical moments when women's cultural achievement has flourished in the public realm. This study will explore the links between learning and imagination forged by women in the public sphere of letters. In doing so, it will inevitably revisit some of the dichotomies commonly used in forming a historical understanding of eighteenth-century culture: the public and private; reason and feeling; masculine and feminine; local and national; the domestic and the civic; Enlightenment and Romanticism.

Feminist scholarship of the last few decades has not only enlarged and invigorated existing maps of the past but has also required a reassessment of familiar contours and reference points. The reappraisal and reinterpretation of canonical works of history and philosophy has been fuelled to a



Plate 1 Richard Samuel, *The Nine Living Muses of Great Britain* (c. 1778), oil on canvas, 132.1cm × 154.9cm © National Portrait Gallery, London (NPG 4905). Left to right, standing: Elizabeth Carter, Anna Barbauld, Elizabeth Sheridan (née Linley), Hannah More and Charlotte Lennox. Left to right, seated: Angelica Kauffman, Catharine Macaulay, Elizabeth Montagu and Elizabeth Griffith

large extent by the research of social and literary historians in rediscovering the large number of women who participated in the various spheres of early modern culture.¹ History is being rewritten from all angles, to include the stories of women, to make them visible once more. Scholars today appear to be involved in a double inquiry, to correct previous blindnesses and to open eyes to new methods of research which acknowledge women as a distinct social category. As this type of research progresses, a historiography of feminist writing is beginning to be formed, in which the 'woman question' is acknowledged to have its own long and varied history. There is a mutual relationship between writing *about* women and writing *by* women, representations of and by women, which the allegorical figures of the muses embody. In the process of exploring such interconnections through the model provided by Samuel's painting of 'living muses', we encounter an active and powerful sense of the way in which women's real and symbolic presence converges in their contemporary culture.

The novelist Maria Edgeworth observed in her argument for the 'female right to literature' in 1795, 'Women of literature are much more numerous of late than they were a few years ago. They make a class in society, they fill the public eye, and have acquired a degree of consequence and appropriate character.'² Women writers assumed a strong public identity during the second half of the eighteenth century and were frequently evaluated as a distinct body, judged apart from their male contemporaries. The question of whether or not women's writing should form a separate category within literary culture remains a vexed one. The Orange Prize for Fiction, awarded annually to a woman novelist by an all-female panel of judges, was established in 1995 to redress a perceived neglect of women novelists by the major British literary award committees. While the *Times Literary Supplement* has accused the prize of being 'segregationist', others perceive it as a necessary institution in a publishing world that is still not fair to women. Women's identity within (and contribution to) literary history was a question of debate from the moment they first made significant and shaping contributions to an emerging literary public sphere. As each of my chapters – on salon culture, Shakespeare criticism and poetry by the 'living muses' – will show, women were influential in forging the idea of a national literature. They were inevitably aware of their public presence as 'bluestockings', creating supportive networks of female friendship on the one hand but perhaps feeling ambivalent, on the other, about having their sex always taken into account in reactions to their work.

Samuel's painting invites comparison to various eighteenth-century portraits but remains a unique example of a group portrait of women united by their professional status. In choosing to paint *living* muses, Samuel paid tribute to his female contemporaries, a community of artists who personified the aims of a civilized society. He both brought an allegory down to earth and elevated his peers to a higher plane. Samuel's painting was exhibited at the Royal Academy's summer exhibition in 1779 but the image, unusually, had