sciendo

10.2478/ewcp-2022-0016

New Chapters in the Evolution of Taste: How Eighteenth-Century English *Salonnières* Shaped the Culture of Sociability

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Abstract

In eighteenth-century Britain the term *taste* was a new vehicle for discerning subtle qualities of an individual mind's experience of practically anything in the polite world and the world of letters. The term entailed the response of the mind to beauty, and it became popular in each and every genre of writing. The notion of taste acquired a distinctive dimension which effectively disentangles it from the notion of aesthetics emerging early in the nineteenth century as a new area of philosophical enquiry. The eighteenth-century discourses on and ongoing debates over taste and beauty focused on the dominant classicist prototypes of universality, awareness of proportion, harmony and the sense of form and symmetry, principles which were specifically articulated by such *Men of Taste* as the Earl of Shaftesbury, David Hume and Joshua Reynolds, who had a monopoly on taste. However, the eighteenth century laid the groundwork for an alternative notion of taste, which included women in the realm of theorizing in the taste mode. This article aims to look into the category of exotic taste, and more precisely into the fashionable literary coterie of eighteenth-century England, often presided by women writers such as the Bluestockings Elizabeth Montagu, Mary Delany, Catherine Macaulay, and Hannah More, with the purpose of connecting this type of literary promotion, which was effective in shaping

contemporary literary taste, to the theories of taste that anticipated aesthetic judgment in the nineteenth century. Besides, the new social milieu accommodating literary meetings shaped a new discourse which, though ridiculed, facilitated and revitalized conversation in what Hume called "the conversable world" and Samuel Johnson defined as the "clubbable" age. Accordingly, the article will explore the extent to which the discourse employed in such conversations transformed women's literary taste into an accepted critical category and contributed to the formation of literary reputations.

Keywords: theories of taste, s*alonnières*, aesthetics, female taste, culture of sociability, literary promotion, literary coterie, Bluestockings, "the conversable world."

Introduction into Theories of Taste

Theories of taste[1] were born at the turn of the eighteenth century in Britain and neighbouring European countries and soon gained prominence in intellectual circles. Many eighteenth-century studies were dedicated to the discussion of taste and beauty and the effect they had on people's ways of perceiving both their surrounding world and the arts. This does not mean, however, that ideas of taste, truth, and beauty were easy to define or readily employed to describe the rise and evolution of nations, social sensibilities and commercial and political development. In 1754, one contributor[2] to *The World*, a British periodical which was founded by Edwin Moore, printed for Robert Dodsley, and came out every Thursday between 1753-1756, wrote that "Of all the various subjects that have yet exercised the geniuses of modern writers, that of Taste has appeared to be the most difficult to treat; because almost all of them have lost themselves in endeavouring to trace its source" (Tilson 348). Later, in 1935, R.W. Babcock drew attention to the difficulty of tracing and naming the phenomenon of taste, when he discussed how "bravely" E. N. Hooker "has plunged into the problem of

Taste in the eighteenth century" (922), more precisely the period 1750-1770. Since it takes such a lot of bravery to delve into the question of taste and into "the flood of essays on taste" (Hooker 579), let us consider the uses and abuses of the idea of taste in eighteenth-century England.

Although aesthetics did not exist as a discipline or as a branch of philosophy before the early nineteenth century,[3] or, more precisely, before Alexander Baumgarten used the term *Ästhetik* in the second half of the eighteenth century – more precisely in an eponymous treatise published in 1750 – the questions aesthetics asks go back to the beginnings of Western philosophical tradition. Plato and Aristotle wrote largely about issues that are now included in the discussion of aesthetic universalism: the nature of beauty; aesthetic principles of representation; the nature of artistic imitation; the unity of form and content. Eighteenth-century aesthetics viewed beauty as "the primary object of taste" (Guyer 393) and identified the reflection of natural beauty as the vital function of fine art, but the century promoted a wide range of aesthetic theories which explains the complexity of the endeavour to find an objective standard of beauty.

To Baumgarten, beauty represented an intellectual category closely connected with his theory of cognition. He declared aesthetics to be "the perfection of sensible cognition" (McQuillan, "The Science," 147), a phrase which also emerges in Mirbach's German translation (14),[4] "the perfection of sensate cognition" in his *Reflections on Poetry* (5), "the science of the rules of the perfection of sensible knowledge" and "the science of the beautiful" in the German translation of the *Metaphysics*, according to McQuillan ("Baumgarten 52). Aesthetics is thus concerned with the sensible cognition of the lower cognitive faculty. Its concern with the network of physical perceptions and its interest in sensibility and sensitivity were much debated in the eighteenth century. The idea of taste alone was not a matter of debate unless in connection with other issues the century was engrossed in, such as the divine nature of beauty which is reflected in the perfection of the Divine Author, a theory formulated by Thomas Reid and

underpinned by Anthony Ashley Cooper, third Earl of Shaftesbury (Guyer 394). Paul Guyer underlines the complexity of diverse theories of taste, which represent a compound made up of the beautiful, the sublime or the grand, various conceptions of the imagination, emotion and cognition, all united by "the pleasures of the imagination" (426).

As Babcock rightly puts it, eighteenth-century debates drew largely on "taste and morality, natural and acquired taste, taste and elegance, taste and sentiment, taste and novelty, taste and the soul, taste and delicacy, etc." (926). George Dickie even named his study *The Century of Taste*, subtitling it *The Philosophical Odyssey of Taste in the Eighteenth Century*, in order to highlight two fundamental elements in his analysis: the first one includes the author's lifetime interest in theories of taste and considers the eighteenth century as *the* century which focused on the theory of taste as a philosophical phenomenon; the second one, stemming from the subtitle, refers to the classical journey of this theory, whose focus changed from plural responses to different pleasurable or painful experiences to a single universal standard or theory, that is, it "shifted from objective notions of beauty to the subjective notion of taste" (3).

Indeed, that was *the* century of taste, and, in Hume's words, even of a "great variety of taste, as well as of opinion" (203). Professor Draper listed in his 1931 work on "Eighteenth-century English Aesthetics: A Bibliography" the numerous studies that were published from 1752 to 1800: 110 books on aesthetics, 103 treatises on pictorial art, 65 books on gardening and 244 literary discourses (Babcock 923). This shows that there was considerable concern for, and interest in, the problem of taste. The convergence between the functioning of the human mind and of the human body resulted in a new way of thinking and perceiving the world. The perception people got from experimental science and the philosophy of the mind played an important role in how they built their ideas on sensation and how these ideas were connected by association,[5] according to John Locke's theory:

> Some of our ideas have a natural correspondence and connexion one with another […] A musician used to any tune will find that, let it but once begin in his head, the ideas of the several notes of it will follow one another orderly in his understanding, without any care or attention, as regularly as his fingers move orderly over the keys of the organ to play out the tune he has begun, though his unattentive thoughts be elsewhere a wandering. Whether the natural cause of these ideas, as well as of that regular dancing of his fingers be the motion of his animal spirits, I will not determine, how probable soever, by this instance, it appears to be so: but this may help us a little to conceive of intellectual habits, and of the tying together of ideas. (380-1)

The evolution from sensation to idea was supported by Joseph Addison's *Pleasures of the Imagination*,[6] Adam Smith's theory of moral sentiments, Francis Hutcheson's internal sense of beauty, Alexander Gerard's association of ideas, David Hume's theory of human belief and David Hartley's theory of intellectual pleasures, to mention only the most popular ones in the century. Addison identified the pleasures of the imagination with the sense of sight, which converted the sense of taste of the responding imagination into an educated evaluation of paintings, statues, and other objects:

> Our Sight seems designed to supply all these Defects, and may be considered as a more delicate and diffusive kind of Touch, that spreads itself over an infinite Multitude of Bodies, comprehends the largest Figures, and brings into our reach some of the most remote Parts of the Universe. It is this Sense which furnishes the Imagination with its Ideas; so that by the Pleasures of the Imagination or Fancy (which I shall use promiscuously) I here mean such as arise from visible Objects, either when we have them actually in our View, or when we call up their Ideas in our Minds by Paintings, Statues, Descriptions, or any the like Occasion. (394)

The taste mode ranged from objective debates on beauty to a subjective notion. Then, it changed from a vehicle for philosophy into an evaluator and negotiator of culture; from an ideological expression to a social phenomenon; from a moral form of judgment

to an aesthetic concept. George Dickie assumes that Hutcheson laid the foundation for the theory of taste to be taken to the next level of perfection by Hume. In his argument, the eighteenth-century philosophers who came after Hume, Gerard, Alison and Kant moved away from the path that Hume instituted and, as a consequence of this change of paradigm, "theorizing in the taste mode died out" (Dickie 4).

One contributor to the *Royal Magazine* wondered whether "there is an Universal Standard of Taste in the Soul of Man" (313), whereas to another, in *Universal Magazine*, "a good heart" is required in the formation of good taste, in addition to a sound judgment and adequate knowledge of the liberal arts (179-180). Another "Essay on Taste" published in the *Oxford Magazine* in the same year highlighted "sound judgment of men and their writings" (202) as an essential criterion for acquiring a good taste, which laid the foundation for the perfection of good judgment. There was a standard of taste which stemmed from some objective principles, such as unity and variety, symmetry and perfection, but the subjective sensations and consequently, the variety of associations these objective attributes triggered in the human mind turned the eighteenth-century debate on taste into a difficult to agree upon matter: "Indeed, reflections on taste populate so many domains of eighteenth-century discourse that the concept seems extremely far-reaching" (Semi, "Civilization" 96). Despite the fact that the topic of taste was a *locus communis* on the eighteenth-century intellectual agenda, it did not develop into a coherent aesthetic theory until the early nineteenth century. Hume acknowledged that

> Every voice is united in applauding elegance, propriety, simplicity, spirit in writing; and in blaming fustian, affectation, coldness, and a false brilliancy: But when critics come to particulars, this seeming unanimity vanishes; and it is found that they had affixed a very different meaning to their expressions. ("Of the Standard" 203)

A rule was needed to reconcile people's opinions in matters of taste, and philosophers considered it had to be founded only on

experience, in an appropriately Lockean manner. Writers like James Thomson or Anthony Ashley Cooper, third Earl of Shaftesbury defined taste as a quality acquired by study and practice. In Shaftesbury's words, "A legitimate and just taste can neither be begotten, made, conceived or produced without the antecedent labour and pains of criticism" (403). In addition to considering that taste involved a necessary laborious process of study and refinement, Lord Shaftesbury pointed out that taste had both ethical and aesthetic qualities. Goodness and beauty were strongly connected. In a true Romantic vein, James Thomson, the poet who was significantly influenced by Lord Shaftesbury's views, wrote that only by closely studying and examining nature in order to be able to imitate its beauties, can the sense of taste be attained: "Certain in his aim,/Taste, never idly working, saves expense" (175). Some writers, such as the philosopher Thomas Cogswell Upham, inform the general public that taste, as an "intellectual power," has a nature of its own and "arises from long use and experience" (105). Others, like John Gilbert Cooper, define good Taste as "an instantaneous feeling of what is beautiful. Truth, Beauty, and Utility are inseparable" (5). These Platonic ideas of Truth, Beauty and Utility became eighteenth-century standards which were crucial in the formation of taste.

Pleasure seems to be the guiding power of taste, preceding reason and understanding. Hutcheson assumes there is an internal sense of beauty that produces pleasure when it perceives an object. He uses the expression "internal sense"[7] not in the same way as Locke, who equalled it with the cognitive faculty he calls reflection, but as a responsive faculty which produces pleasure: "external sense is required to bring an object into the mind for internal sense to react to and produce pleasure" (Dickie 7).

Pleasure comes before rational judgment in J. G. Cooper's *Letters Concerning Taste* from 1754 and it represents the effect of good Taste on the spectator's emotions. Cooper's less researched *Letters* "is the first full-length work that is dedicated to the discussion of taste and beauty in the eighteenth century and their indispensable functions in the making and evaluation of art" (Jung

65). His theory introduces a new feminine element that is independent of and superior to, beauty and even beyond art and that is inspirational in the formation of taste: grace,[8] "a Taste for a superior Accomplishment" (J. G. Cooper 14). Foreshadowing Friedrich Schiller's ideas and overtaking Joseph Spence's principles, Cooper allegorically depicts Taste as "the Daughter of one of the Graces, begot by Knowledge, who was the Son of Contemplation" (133). In terms of gender, Taste and Grace are understood as feminine attributes, being endowed with the powers of procreation and birth. According to Spence, "Grace, like Poetry, must be born with a Person; and is never, wholly, to be acquired by Art" (qtd. in Jung 70), a statement which contradicts Thomson and Shaftesbury's theories of taste. Grace is a typically feminine quality that is displayed in conversation, which was the dominant notion around which literary salons and groupings were formed. What can be inferred from these theories is that taste was defined as a harmonious combination between our sensitive perceptions and our cognitive faculties. Baumgarten found a name for this blend – *aesthetics* – and defined it as a "science of sensible knowledge" (qtd. in Croce 88)[9] – *cognitio sensitiva* – in the pure British empiricist tradition. The following subchapter will look at the ways sensible knowledge translated into the literary salons of the Bluestockings as a consequence of the "revolution in taste" (Price 2) late eighteenth century underwent: "from an aristocratic conception of taste linked to the power to rule, disinterestedness, and universality to a more democratic model" (Price 2). As the century progressed, Dickie's "century of taste" evolved into the century of feminine taste, which interconnected aesthetic judgment with practical experience, exoticism, sentiment and morality.

The Century of Feminine Taste

All these avatars and chapters of Taste developed in close connection with the emergence of the public sphere and the construction of the notion of public opinion in modern Britain. Whereas debates on Taste did not assume egalitarian principles and

happened in closed male intellectual circles, the network of women's salons afforded egalitarian principles of sociability and of free conversations turned formal. While taste was something theorized and imposed, tending to a singular perspective, the literary salons, which "contributed much to the transnational circulation of ideas, goods, and practices" (Prendergast 7), gave the floor to opinions and plural views, based on debates and egalitarian ethics. The public sphere challenged established conventions as well as notions of authority and hierarchy: it opposed uniformity and it ignored class and gender distinctions. Following the principles of the French salon, acceptance to the circle was based on merit, rather than origin – Hannah More, Eva Garrick, and Elizabeth Carter, for instance, came from humble backgrounds, while Frances Boscawen, Samuel Johnson, and Horace Walpole were persons of high rank. Unlike the French salon, however, the English one was a mixture of both men and women – in 1788, More wrote that Dr. Blagdon was "a new blue-stocking, and a very agreeable one" (qtd. in Heller 20). In place of assigning certain people ranks and positions of power and authority, the newly formed public sphere advanced a society that functioned according to its own principles of differentiation. Not only did the notion of taste become a popular and a universal concept, but it also influenced both elites and the general public, though in uneven ways. This pattern was commonly noticed in the phenomenon of the literary salons within English society, the Bluestockings[10] being the most popular and influential. *Literary talk* by women writers was as important as the theories on taste advanced by Shaftesbury, Addison, Hutcheson, Hume (who praised the role of women in the formation of civil society), Burke, Alison, and others. The intellectual women who became connected inside the literary club known as The Bluestocking Circle "did not really have a sense of a feminist tradition" (Myers 15), but had role models to follow, friends and family to support them and other writers to learn from.

What is known nowadays about the Bluestocking circle comes mainly from the correspondence between members of the intellectual circle.[11] There are collections of letters – "from

Montagu to Carter (Montagu 1810), from Carter to Talbot and Vesey (Carter, 1809), and from Carter to Montagu (Montagu-Pennington, 1817)" (Brooks 10), which were commonly curated and added biographical commentary by male family members. Also, diaries were published, such as Mary Hamilton's. The first literary generation of Bluestockings included Boscawen, Carter, Hester Chapone, Mary Delany, Sarah Fielding, Catherine Macaulay, Elizabeth Montagu, leader of this generation, also known as "the Queen of the Blues," Sarah Scott, Clara Reeve, the "provincial Bluestocking" (Kelly 105), Catherine Talbot and Elizabeth Vesey. Of the second generation, Anna Laetitia Barbauld, More, Anna Seward, and Hester Lynch Thrale (later Piozzi) continued and enhanced the work of their forerunners.

The English literary salon did not last long – about 40 years, between 1750 and 1790 – but, during this time, both generations of the Bluestocking club managed to change the literary scene of the century. Besides, they had a say in providing practical help to women writers and promoting higher education for women and girls while supporting their intellectual pursuits, since they were denied access to higher education: the salon was acknowledged to be "an informal university for women" (Bodek 185). Apparently, Carter was the most productive writer of all, followed by Montagu and Scott. Mary Delany wrote a libretto from *Paradise Lost* for Händel, Sarah Fielding is supposed to have contributed to Henry Fielding's *Joseph Andrews* and to the second volume of his *Miscellanies* (1743); Catherine Macaulay supported modern feminist politics in Britain and promoted equality between the sexes in education. She is considered "the first prominent female historian in England" (Miegon 29) in addition to being "the first woman admitted to the reading room of the British Museum" (Miegon 30). Reeve opposed slavery and fought for women's rights; Talbot militated for equality of the sexes, while More, along with Hester Chapone and Sarah Trimmer, set up Sunday Schools "to fight illiteracy among working-class children" (Miegon 32).

Considered against their background, placed between Enlightenment taste and Romantic aesthetics, between the

aristocratic republic of taste and the democratic discourse of taste, the Bluestockings demanded political, social and economic equality by fighting not only for their own education and rights, but also for female education in general. In revising and reinterpreting their role in modernizing the public sphere of letters, some present-day critics fail to take into account that the English *salonnières* got involved in educational projects that were outside the scope of the literary salons. Their greatest merit is that they translated the philosophical and historiographical discourses into more accessible means of transmitting information, thus popularizing knowledge in a true Enlightenment manner. This perspective questions Bodek's suggestion that the Bluestockings were a conservative group who "did not request an extension of education to all women" (196), since they educated themselves, but not others. In a similar vein, Harriet Guest points out that English *salonnières* were not as vocal as they should have been: "Like many other women writing in the eighteenth century before the 1790s, these women did not obviously or vociferously attempt to reform the condition or treatment of women" (59). Seemingly, this type of criticism adopts an anachronic manner in reassessing the work of *salonnières*. Was there any alternative to conservatism when radicalism was not an attractive option for middling and lower orders? At the end of the eighteenth century, the French Revolution and the French War threatened the social order, in addition to the British constitution and independence. Monarchy prevailed and George III was seen as the savior of the nation. Many of his supporters stressed the importance of royal authority and even proclaimed the king's superiority over the parliament. The Church of England played an important part in strengthening conservative political ideology. Tories and Whigs alike agreed that the country was in the hands of divine providence and to preserve order meant to obey the established authority of the state.

The Bluestockings responded to all these political challenges and committed themselves to public politics. In 1772, Sir John Macpherson wrote to Lady Montagu that "George III does not know how much he is indebted to the chearful and Classic

Assemblies of your Chinese Room" (Guest 63). It seems that the king sharpened up his thoughts when he needed to make political decisions: "we are all indebted to you [Montagu]; and that without your being sensible of it" (Guest 64).

The Bluestockings' emphasis on conversation between the sexes on equal terms "aimed to build upon and consolidate new ways of thinking about the relation between private and public life, responding, in particular, to notions of civic virtue explored in the work of Addison, Shaftesbury, and Hume" (Eger 108). Addison's philosophy is closer to the Bluestockings' than is Shaftesbury's in popularizing knowledge and bringing it in the realm of social and public spaces, even if they shared the same political and literary circles:

> It was said of Socrates, that he brought philosophy down from heaven, to inhabit among Men; and I shall be ambitious to have it said of me, that I have brought Philosophy out of Closets and Libraries, Schools and Colleges, to dwell in Clubs and Assemblies, at Tea-Tables and in Coffee-Houses. (*The Spectator* 44)

Addison's message reflects his attitude to the education of "Man" by educating and cultivating taste. In fact, his role as 'the Censor of Great Britain' (Marshall 634) identifies with *The Spectator*'s main aim, whereas the reading public is the recipient of his determination to formulate some rules and forms of critical judgment to establish a standard of public taste among the middle-class readers. Shaftesbury, on the other hand, engaged in dialogue only with a limited aristocratic audience, which was different from the Bluestockings' intention to include diverse groups of people and ranks in their polite societies. The new social milieu accommodating literary meetings shaped a new discourse which, though ridiculed, facilitated and revitalized conversation in what Hume called "the conversable world" or what other eighteenth-century poets identified as the "sweet converse." The realm of conversation was governed by ladies and the underlying principle of the conversable territory was the standard of taste. Stating that

any conversation requires rational topics, Hume took a clear stance against the distinction between the learned and the conversable world, announcing the necessity for "a good correspondence betwixt these two states, which have so great a dependence on each other" ("Of Essay Writing" 2), considering that the two realms are inseparable:

> The conversable world join to a sociable disposition, and a taste for pleasure, an inclination for the easier and more gentle exercises of the understanding, for obvious reflections on human affairs, and the duties of common life, and for the observation of the blemishes or perfections of the particular objects that surround them . . . I shall give intelligence to the learned of whatever passes in company, and shall endeavour to import into company whatever commodities I find in my native country proper for their use and entertainment. The balance of trade we need not be jealous of, nor will there be any difficulty to preserve it on both sides. (1-2)

Influenced by eighteenth-century French *salonnières*, Hume paid his tribute to "women of sense and education" ("Of Essay Writing" 3), that is middle- to upper-class women, the only ones who had access to education – mainly in girls' boarding schools – and who became leading figures of the conversable world, or, as he himself put it, "the sovereigns of the empire of conversation" ("Of Essay Writing" 3). This dominant idea of the conversable world does not live on its own but depends on associated ideas of coteries and literary clubs, debates and disagreements, the public sphere and sociability, all of them reflecting the ideal model of rational, learned, yet social conversation which eradicated differences of status and reinforced the equal exchange of opinions. Dena Goodman describes the Parisian salon as an Enlightenment project aimed at changing the common thinking, and these characteristics were inherited by salons in London, which enhanced the civilizing role of women:

> What distinguished salons from courts and the dominant society they represented was not only their conception of intellectual

> activity as useful work, but also the mixing of ranks and orders, the absence of hierarchy and marks of social distinction that took place in them. . . . The kind of conversation fostered in the salons depended upon a recognized equality among the speakers which allowed for the very activity of criticism and judgment that characterized their speech. (338)

Intellectual women in eighteenth-century England "enjoyed more independence than their counterparts in France" (Melton 212) and became major transmitters of ideas and opinions in literary circles. They were the *salonnières* of London who, on British playground, were called the Bluestocking Circle. Their independence was fostered by various factors: they received education at home, and they came from propertied families, which afforded them time and money to enjoy the company of urban high society.

Against all odds imposed by the social constraints of their time, the women intellectuals who set up the Bluestocking Circle valued education, independence, virtue and learned companionship. As a result, they founded a network of communications and debates that reinvigorated the discourse of the old Republic of Letters. The members of the Bluestocking Club became socially prominent not on the grounds of their aristocratic descendance – even though without this significant detail, they would not have been able to obtain an education – but on account that they were well-educated women of letters. Since these learned women were excluded from the political public sphere, they became more active in the realm of the literary public sphere, which usually took place in a salon. As an institution of the Enlightenment, the salon enforced fresh rules and regulations, in addition to a new set of values and an alternative to the philosophical discourse. In all likelihood, the Enlightenment salon was an invention which changed the paradigm of intellectual discourse and embroidered the Republic of Letters with a new garment by replacing the old aristocracy with an assembly of women intellectuals who turned the old Republic of Letters into a new Republic of Letters characterized by social mobility and independent thought in conversations and radical debates.

More considered that conversation was not censored and that in the past "there had been a kind of social world of the educated and polite that could cut across differences of gender and politics" (qtd. in Guest 65), which is the very attribute of the Bluestocking assemblies. In her ceremonial poem, "The Bas Bleu: or, Conversation" (published in 1786 by Horace Walpole's Strawberry Hill Press), More spoke with conviction about the Bluestocking Circle as the campaigners for the Enlightenment, the ones who particularly supported women's education and social activism:

> 'Tis more than wit, 'tis moral beauty,
> 'Tis pleasure rising out of duty.
> Nor vainly think the time you waste,
> When temper triumphs over taste. (371)

Elizabeth Vesey's summer reunions at Tunbridge Wells or winter London gatherings described in this poem introduce the miscellaneous company of Samuel Johnson, Walpole, George Lyttleton, Montagu and Carter, all of whom discussed matters of "knowledge, taste and the arts" (Haslett 40). The whole poem is constructed on feminine grounds: it is a tribute to Vesey, "the recipient of Carter's letter and praise" (Prendergast 78); Conversation, Mind and Attention are all female attributes; and women intellectuals are praised as best conversationalists. There was a strong relationship between female manners and social evolution in the eighteenth century. Since the philosophers argued that reason and the faculties of the mind are based on people's passions and tastes, women's role in determining what taste was and how the criteria according to which taste functioned had a significant influence on the writings and the philosophy of the age. It is now obvious that women intellectuals played an essential part in the public sphere in a number of informal ways. The English s*alonnières* shaped the literary, social and intellectual tastes of the eighteenth-century, responding to and influencing the male writers of the age.

In analysing two pamphlets written by Chapone, Clarissa Campbell Orr comments on how much the *bas-bleu* influenced Samuel Richardson's second novel, *Clarissa*, and on the development of his third novel, *Sir Charles Grandison*. Chapone took issue with the writer's opinion that parents should decide who their daughter marries against her will (Orr 103). In a letter to Richardson, Chapone expresses her gratitude for having been entrusted by the writer with the manuscripts of his stories and engages in a debate on the distinction between moral obligation and the principles of duty and gratitude. In support of her argument, she quotes Samuel von Puffendorf, who "clearly and exactly" expresses her sentiments: "The filial duty consists in honouring their parents." Her only *provisio* is that "the filial duty, as here explained, be owing only to such as perform the parental duty" (113). Chapone is one of the best examples of *bas-bleus* who were praised for their opinionated attitudes and active presence on the literary stage. George Ballard published his book *Memoirs of Several Ladies of Great Britain who have been celebrated for their writings or skill in the learned languages, arts, and sciences* (1752) in collaboration with Chapone in order to correlate British women with their continental counterparts such as Anne Dacier and Anna Maria van Schurman (O'Brien 31).

This network of literary exchanges kept the Republic of Letters going and depended on subscriptions to periodicals or memberships in reading clubs. Montagu "sponsored periodic gatherings at her home at which such acquaintances as Johnson and Edmund Burke, Carter and Hester Mulso Chapone (1727-1801) engaged in conversation" (Kairoff 168). Within the Bluestocking Circle, Elizabeth Montagu not only became the patroness of conversability and politeness, but also the queen of marketability, initiating collaborations between writers and editors and organizing promotional campaigns to attract subscribers for writers' publications, a vital system to support intellectual activity and connection among writers and philosophers. Authors could publish their works by "subscription, fee for limited copyright, profit-sharing and publishing on commission" (Eger 25). Subscription

was both an active agent of dissemination and a commercial engine for young and experienced writers alike. In 1758, Scott and Montagu led a campaign to publish Fielding's translation of Xenophon's *Memoirs of Socrates*, which "attracted 611 subscribers, paying six shillings each for a total of 707 copies" (Sabor 11). Subscription was also helpful in Elizabeth Carter's case, since her translation of Epictetus[12] succeeded in gaining resounding success – surpassing Fielding's –by "attracting over one thousand subscribers and receiving enthusiastic reviews" (Sabor 11). Women's efforts were furthered by Samuel Johnson, who supported their endeavour in campaigning on behalf of less-known authors to get subscriptions for their publications. Johnson and Carter collaborated with the aim of

> procuring subscribers to Anna Williams's (1706-83) *Miscellanies in Prose and Verse* (1766) and Carter subscribed to the volumes of Sarah Dixon (fl. 1716-45), Jane Brereton, Mary Jones, Mary Masters, and Mary Whateley Darwall, among others. (168)

The subscription system allowed flexibility to the English literary market, which enjoyed "a relatively liberal censorship" (Melton 214) and created decent publication conditions for male and female writers alike.

Since the eighteenth-century standard of taste was associated with male aesthetic theories, the alternative culture of sociability that intellectual women assembled created such powerful networks of communication which, despite the flaws and misapprehensions involved, shaped the cultural, commercial, and aesthetic Enlightenment arena. The eighteenth-century craze for exotic products and practices resulted from the first contact with China, which came as a shock for the Europeans, as their whole cultural paradigm was challenged. Europe adopted the *chinoiserie* style, which soon became a desired fashion to admire and emulate. People who collected *chinoiseries* were mainly royalty, nobility, and the *connoisseurs*, some of whom pretended to have had taste and refinement in matters of art, gardening, and manners. They

collected Chinese cabinets, screens, fans, chairs, tables, porcelains, lacquered bowls, and wallpapered the interior of their houses with Chinese designs. In palaces a special chamber was often designed as a special room to house the porcelain collection of the owner, who *imagined* that was the Chinese style. This interest covered China with an enchanted aura which provided a source of decorative exoticism the affluent incorporated into their own home, for which reason it was perceived as a feminine style. Elizabeth Montagu, for example, enjoyed various architectural styles, including classical, Greek, and Oriental ones, employing either James Wyatt or Robert Adams for decorative purposes. She had a Chinese drawing room in her Mayfair house[13] decorated for her by the expert in architecture, Adams. In January 1767, Montagu was writing to her sister Sarah, pointing out the very feminine air of the room, which might be a reference to the plethora of women gatherings in her home:

> My Dressing Room is really wonderfully pretty. Mr. Adam has done his best. He has exerted much genius on the doors in emulation of his rival Stewart. I assure you the dressing room is now just the female of the great room, for sweet attractive grace, for winning softness, for *le je ne sais quoi* it is incomparable. (Eger 69)

Taste, for this reason, was associated with femininity and the exoticism of Oriental imports: "Montagu's choice of chinoiserie could be seen as a form of resistance to the predominantly masculine sociability associated with classical taste" (Eger 69). The social dimension of taste embraces nuances of luxury and exoticism when placed in the hands of intellectual women who suggested the feminine pole in reference to matters of taste. The preference for exotic as well as eccentric commodities, all the more so as they ornamented a certain spatial domestic scene, bolstered a commonly-held belief in a gendered taste. Thus, the marginal sense of taste that was present in eighteenth-century Britain, but not explicitly included in the texts concerned with theorizing taste in "the century of taste" (Dickie 3) refers to female taste, which

tended toward the foreign and the exotic and was commonly associated with extravagance and luxury.

Conclusions

As a trope which mingled different facets of literary and social issues, the literary salon connected writers into literary groups and encouraged them to inspire and get inspiration from each other's work. The salon that gathered women writers in the Bluestocking Circle served as a model on the basis of which both salonnières and philosophers hoped to transform society. Their collaborative effort had a huge impact on shaping contemporary literary taste, while transforming women's discourse on taste into an accepted critical category, thus contributing to the formation of the literary reputations. Despite reservations which voiced some doubt about the capacity of women writers to overcome conservatism and participate in cultural transfer, one cannot deny the intellectual achievements of the Bluestockings. It is true that male philosophers and writers influenced in crucial ways women's discourses on taste and moral beauty, but the scholarly women classically painted by Richard Samuel as the nine living muses of Great Britain have also been visually represented as a rowdy crowd by Thomas Rowlandson in 1815 in an etching entitled *Breaking up of the Bluestocking Club*. While the former representation focuses on the rationality of the bluestockings, the latter highlights their mundane bodies, which might be a reference to the social prominence and visibility they acquired in the eighteenth century. This double perspective also proves "taste's two temporal poles" that James Noggle (3) mentions when invoking subjectivity in the historical process and progress of the refinement of taste. From Addison to Montagu, the journey of the refinement of taste acquired various discursive structures which depended on specific social and historical circumstances. The discourse on taste ranged from the pleasurable realm to the economic circuit which enabled the texts to circulate and be distributed to the public. The philosopher's texts would not have had visibility and access to the public without the

support of the literary salons, the subscription system advocated by the Bluestocking circle, and the network of exchange they made possible in the exotic drawing rooms, all of them contributing to the spreading of information and the formation of literary reputations in agreement with the century's standard of taste.

Notes:

[1] R. W. Babcock published a bibliography of the periodical items which discuss taste in formal theoretical style, an indispensable article for eighteenth-century researchers, which, however, "does not by any means exhaust the total potentiality of periodical material even in the late eighteenth century" (926). It covers the years from 1750 to 1770, a period of time identified by Edward Niles Hooker as the time "when the search for a standard of taste was at its height" (577).

[2] According to nineteenth-century editions, the contributor's name is Tilson, and so, putting together this piece of information, the signature 'J.T' at the end of the article featuring the 1770 edition and the research done to find out the full name of the essayist, it came out that one of the regular contributors to *The Word* was James Tilson, a lawyer. For further reference, please see Squibbs 103.

[3] Maria Semi considers that during the eighteenth century in Britain, aesthetics constructed "an ideal bridge between the sciences and the humanities" ("Between Sciences" 380), based on the change that man's representation underwent between the seventeenth and the eighteenth century, from *homme machine* to *homme sensible*, according to Sergio Moravia's conceptualization ("Between Sciences" 380).

[4] Johann Gottfried Herder referred to Baumgarten's definition of aesthetics as it emerged in the first paragraph of the *Aesthetica*: "Aesthetics (as the theory of the liberal arts, as inferior cognition, as the art of beautiful thinking and as the art of thought analogous to reason) is the science of sensuous cognition" (3, footnote 5). Baumgarten's major work has not been translated into English. Nevertheless, there have been two successful attempts to translate it into German. Portions of Baumgarten's work were translated into German by Hans Rudolf Schweizer, *Ästhetik als Philosophie der sinnlichen Erkenntnis: Eine Interpretation der "Aesthetica" A.G. Baumgartens mit teilweiser Wiedergabe der lateinischen Textes und deutscher Übersetzung* (Basel: Schwabe, 1973). The first complete German translation of Baumgarten's

Latin volumes from 1750 and 1758 was made by Dagmar Mirbach, *Ästhetik*. Latin-German edition, 2 vols. (vol. 1, pp. LXXX, 1–595; vol. 2, pp. IX, 596–1305). Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 2007.

[5] The theory of association of ideas was first discussed by John Locke, but other similar theories supported by his followers – Francis Hutcheson, Edmund Burke, Alexander Gerard and Archibald Alison – hugely influenced the topic of taste in eighteenth-century Britain. This theory has always relied on theories of sensation and perception, since both pleasurable and painful ideas stemmed from the association prompted by the faculty of perception.

[6] Peter Kivy, "The 'Sense' of Beauty and the Sense of 'Art': Hutcheson's Place in the History and Practice of Aesthetics," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 53, No. 4 (Autumn, 1995), pp. 349-357. Addison defines taste as "that faculty of soul, which discerns the beauties of an author with pleasure, and the imperfections with dislike" (Addison and Steele 1879, no. 409). Taste is actually a combination of bodily sensation (it is, by no means, a lower faculty), and critical reasoning.

[7] His inspiration is Shaftesbury.

[8] A distinct opinion on the nature of beauty and the standard of taste came from a group of critics known as the School of Taste, who highlighted grace as an attribute of the heart prevailing over the mind in the aesthetic judgment. Grace, the undefined ingredient, was considered the *je-ne-sais-quoi* that stemmed from an enthusiastic approach to the essential problems of aesthetic criticism. The indefinable element in the definition of taste had a disruptive influence on the principles assigned to this category, since it contradicted the aspiration to a specific standard, which was based on precise rules and criteria. See, in this respect, Hooker's analysis (578, 589).

[9] The term *cognitio sensitiva* was coined by Baumgarten, who founded the type of aesthetic reasoning. Benedetto Croce sums up Baumgarten's ethic and aesthetic principles while specifically mentioning that the laws governing aesthetics – an independent science – are universal. Therefore, aesthetics is defined as "*scientia cognitionis sensitivae, theoria liberalium artium, gnoseologia inferior, ars pulcre cogitandi, ars analogi rationis*" (Croce 88). In other words, in Baumgarten's view, aesthetics is a science of sensible cognition as opposed to intellectual cognition. It is the theory of liberal arts, the art of thinking beautifully and by analogy with reason. Since Baumgarten considered – like most of his contemporaries – that the

body was inferior to the mind, he attached the senses of sight and hearing to the mind, not the body, which explains the incapacity of art to render reasonable knowledge. Therefore, "complete" knowledge can only be achieved by the union of scientific and sensible aesthetics, a complementary relation between the two types of knowledge, a universal and a particular one.

[10] We are informed that the term "was coined by Admiral Boscawen, from the stockings of Benjamin Stillingfleet, who, too poor to buy evening dress, attended gatherings in his daytime blue worsteds" (Haslett 9). In addition to this, there is a note stating the origin of the term, which was advertised in *The Morning Herald and Daily Advertiser*: "A division is said to have taken place among the Blue Stockings, owing to a dispute which arose at Mrs. V y's [? Mrs. Vesey's] at their last meeting, and would probably have been attended with serious consequences, but for the timely interposition of some unlettered auditors. Mrs. M [? Mrs. Montagu] is said to be at the head of the seceding party, which, we are informed, has already come to a resolution of instituting a club in opposition to the Blues" (Palmer 357). The term acquired significance when women's education was disregarded since men "thought it altogether out of place" (Palmer 357). The whole story ended up (or started anew) with the following question: "The stockings cannot be too blue if the petticoats are long enough to cover them" (Palmer 357).

[11] It should be noted that the term "intellectual" is not, as it occurs here, used in its modern, institutional meaning, which is that of a person who relies on rationality and the intellect in making his judgments, but with a view to the eighteenth-century context, that is, in reference to the Bluestockings' contribution to the improvement of learning and literature as well as to the advancement of education for the public benefit.

[12] Her translation continued to be reprinted in England in the nineteenth century.

[13] Most of the literary gatherings and stimulating discussions took place in Montagu's house in Hill Street, Mayfair. She called the social assemblies "conversation parties" (*Women's Studies Encyclopedia* 173).

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