

## **The Gentleman's Daughter. Women's Lives in Georgian England.**

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Amanda Vickery's new book is largely based on several rich collections of women's letters and diaries, most notably those of Elizabeth Parker Shackleton, whose family belonged to the lesser gentry and mercantile elite of Lancashire in the eighteenth century. These women's voices -- in turns passionate, pious, sentimental and sardonic, resentful and resigned -- vividly emerge in Vickery's narrative, who herself writes in a witty and colourful manner.

*The Gentleman's Daughter* is, however, two different sorts of books struggling to coexist within one binding: a potentially popular history, and an historiographical intervention of mixed success. It could be seen as a colourful recounting of eighteenth century women's lives which might appeal to the same audience as Stella Tillyard's *Aristocrats*. Vickery is at her best when she analyses these eighteenth-century women's diaries and letters from their own point of view, stressing the values they held most dear: prudence and propriety, politeness, gentility, economy, and motherhood.

Vickery provides a useful modification to the late 1970s hypotheses of Lawrence Stone and Randolph Trumbach that the eighteenth century witnessed the rise of the affective family and an increasing emphasis on equality, affection, and romance in marriage.<sup>(1)</sup> While acknowledging that parents were less likely to force unwanted spouses on their children, Vickery asserts that fortune and rank still predominated as considerations in choosing a spouse, although she also points out prudence and passion were not incompatible. Vickery subtly untangles the complicated nexus of "power, duty, and honour" in the letters from the long courtship of Elizabeth and Robert Parker, which took seven years to overcome her father's disapproval, demonstrating that these missives both evinced intense, spontaneous emotion, and drew upon contemporary epistolary and literary genres of romance.

Once couples were married, Vickery finds, they often enjoyed a genuine companionship and affection for many years. She juxtaposes the earthy "delights and drolleries" of the mid-eighteenth century Ramsdens with the sentimental dependence of the early nineteenth-century Whitakers, although she does not ask whether they represent changing times. As she demonstrates, contra Stone and Trumbach, while literature increasingly celebrated romantic marriage, companionship and affection did not require equality; couples assumed that husbands should be masters. Marriages worked best, however, when husbands tempered their prerogatives with kindness instead of constantly asserting dominance. And a few marriages, she reveals, were very unhappy and violent indeed, such as those of Elizabeth Shackleton Parker and Ellen Weeton Stock. Even in less extreme cases, she eloquently and perceptively notes, a wife's "superficial deference" to her husband's mastery could "mask a contemptuous heart," citing E.P. Thompson's insight that the same man who tugged his forelock to the squire by day might write a threatening anonymous letter to him at night.

This is an insight into the deferential nature of eighteenth century society that might have been further developed.

Unfortunately, Vickery does not extensively discuss the problem of married women's control or lack thereof over their property, not only in terms of separation but in terms of marriage settlements and dower rights, which was a vexed and controversial issue in the eighteenth century. She neglects to consider the argument of Susan Staves, who asserts that by the late eighteenth century, courts became more reluctant to cede women's control over their property in marriage settlements and separation agreements.<sup>(2)</sup>

In one of her best chapters, she combines astute historiographical analysis with an empathetic and often harrowing description of the pains and joys of motherhood. Vickery follows Linda Pollard and other historians who some years ago refuted Ariés's thesis that early modern parents did not care about their children in an era of high infant mortality, but she also asserts that childbirth was difficult and dangerous for women in the face of medical historians who claim that maternal mortality was "only" 6-7%. She also counters the valorization of midwives with the information that these genteel women often preferred highly-skilled male accoucheurs to untrained women.

Vickery begins the book by drawing upon her well-known article which critiques what she sees as the central concepts of women's history: a decline from a golden age, the public private division, the notion of separate spheres.<sup>(3)</sup> She adroitly refutes the notion of a 'golden age' in which women enjoyed greater autonomy in the seventeenth century which they lost by the eighteenth by pointing out that this pattern of decline and fall is seen in most centuries studied by women's historians. When it comes to intervening in more current historiographical debates about separate spheres and the public and private, however, Vickery is less convincing. She critiques what she sees as the orthodoxy of women's history: that during the eighteenth century women were forced into a passive, feminine role in a secluded domestic private sphere, helpless and deprived of any public place. To argue against this notion, Vickery makes two somewhat contradictory claims. She asserts that the idea that the confinement of women to the domestic sphere and their exclusion from the public was nothing new, going back to Aristotle and the bible. But she also wants to argue that eighteenth century women were not passively secluded in the home, but active agents, and increasingly venturing out into public spaces.

The first problem with Vickery's argument is that this alleged feminist orthodoxy wildly caricatures the women's history of the last ten years, which becomes clear when the reader glances at the notes for this assertion. Most of Vickery's sources for this orthodoxy come, not from current feminist historiography, but from old chestnuts of Victorian studies published in the 1940s and 1950s, plus a few sources from the early days of women's history in the late 1970s. Martha Vicinus' edited volume, *Suffer and Be Still* (1972) is cited, but not her *A Widening Sphere: Changing Roles of Victorian Women* (1977). She does include more current work on the ideology of late Victorian education, but this cannot illustrate the feminist historiography about the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Vickery's chief target, however, seems to be a more recent work, Leonore Davidoff's and Catherine Hall's *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780-1850* (1987). However, Davidoff and Hall's argument is much more sophisticated than a crude dichotomy of passive femininity and active masculinity. They demonstrate that the definitions of "public" and "private" were not eternal, unchanged since Aristotle, but, as Leonore Davidoff has recently noted, unstable and mutable, "constantly shifting, being made and remade," especially in the eighteenth century.<sup>(4)</sup> Davidoff and Hall's central hypothesis is that the ideology of domesticity unified a middle class divided by region, economic interests, politics, and religion. This ideology, they stress, did not always correspond to public and private, masculine and feminine, for middle-class men were intensely involved in home and family. While traditionalists may have always told women to stay in the home, the very meaning and function of domesticity were dramatically changed for the middling sort of people with commercialization, professionalisation, urbanisation, and the consumer revolution. Similarly, the meaning of the "public" was transformed in the eighteenth century with the challenge to royal and aristocratic power and the rise of associational life. Furthermore, Davidoff and Hall

present a complex chronology of the evolution of separate spheres in which women's exclusion from work and politics occurred at different times in terms of ideology and actuality, as both the economy, and the political worlds, were transformed. The reaction against women's political role came in the 1790s, with the French revolution, as part of a wider crackdown on radicalism. Although the withdrawal of middle-class women from productive work took place very gradually over the course of a century, domestic ideologues did not widely denounce middle-class women's productive role until the 1830s and 1840s, when any gainful employment aside from teaching irrevocably damaged a lady's gentility.

Subsequent articles and books, of course, have modified the chronology and challenged some of the content of this hypothesis. How does Vickery's book compare? In her introduction, Vickery seems reluctant to place her women within the historiography of the middle class, airily dismissing "the ever-emerging middle class" along with "the insidious rise of capitalism, the collapse of community, [and] the nascent consumer society" as phenomenon to be found in "almost any century", and the industrial revolution as vastly exaggerated (p. 3). Like "virtue" "the public" and "the private", the "middle class" is a term which obsessed eighteenth-century people, but upon whose definition they could not agree. But that is no excuse for historians to side-step the question. Vickery defines her people as belonging to "polite" society, the intermarried ranks of the lesser gentry and wealthy professionals and merchants of rural Lancashire society. By demonstrating the lesser gentry's espousal of domestic practices and values, Vickery wants to undermine Davidoff and Hall's central hypothesis, that domesticity unified the middle class. However, during the mid eighteenth century, she notes, some sources *did* define these people as the middle class. And one of her major sources is the diary of Ellen Weeton Stock, a governess from the Preston area. Miss Weeton married Aaron Stock, who "leased a Wigan factory from [her brother's] mother-in-law." The couple first lived "at the back of the factory" but "moved to polite Standishgate once Aaron Stock's enterprise, bolstered by his wife's modest capital, began to prosper"(p. 77). Surely this is a perfect example of Davidoff and Hall's hypothesis that as middle-class manufacturers became more wealthy they moved their families away from the workplace to suburbs; if not, it deserves more than a cursory discussion (as on p. 35) concerning the similarities and differences between manufacturing families and the mercantile/gentry elite. Letters and diaries are extremely rich sources, but it might have been helpful in establishing the representativeness of these people to provide census material and more detailed accounts of the economy, and indeed, more on the lives of these women's husbands and male relatives.

And in Vickery's account, these women's lives *were* more confined to the private domestic sphere than their counterparts in the greater gentry and nobility. Although Vickery's women occasionally handled estate matters in their husband's absence, she notes that "denied access to the professions and public office, women could not pass on the invisible mysteries of institutional power or professional expertise to their descendants." Instead, they generally concerned themselves with their domestic responsibilities, which were considerable: overseeing servants, not only on the house but the home farm in land-owning families, and sewing clothes and linens for the family. But interestingly, these women did not prepare food with their own hands. Domestic tasks could subtly differentiate rank.<sup>(5)</sup> Furthermore, genteel and land-owning women probably always had similar tasks in overseeing estates and accumulating and looking after fine things, but the consumer revolution meant that women of the middling sort now lived in a new world of domestic possessions.

Vickery caricatures the work of Smail, Davidoff and Hall in which "a prudential bourgeoisie is perennially contrasted to an aristocracy that is mad, bad, and dangerous to know." As these historians, and I myself, have long pointed out, the image of the libertine aristocracy was an ideological trope constructed by middle-class and working-class activists to justify their own claims to superior virtue and political power, rather than a description of the behaviour of all or even most aristocrats.<sup>(6)</sup> Libertinism cut through all ranks of eighteenth century society, from the plebeian to the middle class to the elite. Vickery's work shows Ellen Weeton and Elizabeth Shackleton terrorized by their libertine husbands. As Margaret Hunt points out, middle class families were terrified that their sons would fall prey to gambling, drinking, and womanizing.<sup>(7)</sup> But while a libertine husband was disastrous to Elizabeth Shackleton, the consequences for a manufacturing, commercial, or professional family were even more severe than for a land-owning family, for their

prosperity depended on their credit, which depended on their reputations, not just for public, but for private probity. To be sure, many aristocratic and gentry families did espouse the virtues of chastity, sobriety, regularity, economy, and the rational use of time, but as Margaret Hunt and Gary Kelly argue, this can be seen as the "embourgeoisement" of the upper class, a defense against the middle class assertion of superior virtue, even as middle-class traders emulated gentry ideals as well. Whether or not this is true, it is an argument that needs to be dealt with, not dismissed out of hand.[\(8\)](#)

In Vickery's conclusion, she does concede that significant changes occurred especially by the late eighteenth century: the celebration of romantic marriage, the striking expansion of sociability through assemblies, pleasure gardens, and so on, the sentimentalization of motherhood, the rise of politeness, the expansion of women's literary culture. But she does not seem to have gone back and reintegrated these phenomena into her earlier chapters, where she seems to want to argue that women's roles as wives and mothers did not change significantly over the centuries. By her conclusion, however, she echoes Linda Colley to suggest that "the well documented struggles of privileged Victorian women to participate more fully in institutional public life represent less a reaction against irksome restrictions, recently imposed, than a drive to extend yet further the gains made by their Georgian predecessors."[\(9\)](#) This argument runs the danger of replacing the old assumption of decline from a golden age into a new Whiggish narrative of an ever-expanding feminine role. Instead, we need a more nuanced analysis and more carefully delineated chronology of shifting and highly contested definitions of public and private, masculine and feminine, middle class and genteel, during this period.

Many "publics" expanded during the eighteenth-century, and women's access to them varied considerably geographically and over time. The "public" could be defined as politics, whether local or national; public social spaces; or the literary public, to name a few. In the 1770s and 1780s, aristocratic women were often denigrated as abandoning domesticity for the "bon ton," the world of fashion. In a related work, Dror Wahrman suggests that divisions between a national culture of "Society" and local, provincial culture might have been more relevant than those between the middle class and the aristocracy.[\(10\)](#) Vickery hints at the possibility that this might be the case, in the beginning of the book defining her people as those genteel women who did not attend the London season. But when she wants to argue that women enjoyed wider opportunities to participate in public, her focus moves to the court, opera, theatre, and pleasure gardens of London. Although her rural Lancashire women did enjoy provincial assemblies, they tended to retreat from society upon the birth of their children (understandably mired in domesticity), while their husbands continued to hunt and enjoy the socializing connected with rural governance. To be sure, women's activity in local public assemblies (balls and parties), as Leonore Davidoff pointed out years ago in *The Best Circles*, cemented together political alliances and drew the lines of social distinction.[\(11\)](#) But as John Smail asserts out, middle-class men organized in all-male associations to gain control over local governance: a much more powerful "public" domain.[\(12\)](#)

Vickery's women, in fact, seemed more domesticated than those of the ranks below them and just above them. Lower down the social scale, plebeian and even lower-middling tradeswomen were extensively organized in female friendly societies, but Vickery's ladies would only have been involved as patronesses, rather than members who would enjoy raucous monthly meetings in pubs. As Elaine Chalus's recent work reveals, genteel women of the land-owning elite played an important role in the networks of patronage and deference which tied together eighteenth century rural society, entertaining voters in their great country houses, corresponding with their husband's allies, and, in the case of great ladies such as the Duchess of Devonshire lobbying members of Parliament.[\(13\)](#) But although some of their relatives belonged to these higher circles, Vickery's ladies, perhaps because their husbands did not have such political clout, do not seem to have played such a role. What are the implications of this absence of female political influence on the politics of Vickery's genteel folk? They were the sort of men who organized the Yorkshire Association movement for parliamentary reform in the 1780s, attacking the aristocratic politics of place and patronage and asserting their own political manhood. If such gentry and middle-class people shared domestic values, does this help explain why the assertion of a separate middle class identity did not gain ground until the 1790s, if Dror Wahrman's hypothesis is correct?[\(14\)](#) Did the early nineteenth century middle-class men who



asserted their superior domestic morality thus simply appropriate as their own values shared by the gentry and the bourgeoisie? It is possible that the adoption of domestic values by *men*, not only women, might be more significant here, as Davidoff and Hall have shown.

The hypothesis that women's political activity was repressed in the key decades of the 1790s through the early 1810s remains unrefuted. Colley's ladies' patriotic associations were ridiculed at the time, and do not represent a significant political force. To be sure, Vickery has unearthed some fascinating tidbits about early nineteenth century genteel women's book clubs, and cites the work of Clare Midgeley to demonstrate that women engaged in associational life (in this case, anti-slave trade associations) by the 1830s and 1840s. (15) But feminist historians have long argued that women and even conservative men defined domesticity as including the tasks of visiting the poor, running charitable societies, and managing their own households with scientific efficiency: Hannah More reiterated that women must never step out of the bounds of the charitable, the humanitarian, and the village into the wider world of masculine politics. While later women (such as Midgeley's anti-slave trade activists) could manipulate domesticity into justifying a humanitarian intervention, the limitations of this approach transformed many of them into feminists who challenged separate spheres head on.

In sum, Amanda Vickery's book, *The Gentleman's Daughter*, if read as a study of women's diaries and letters, reveals the sardonic, shrewd, compassionate, and humorous voices of these women and their historian: but it does not succeed in giving us a new paradigm for women's history.

## Notes

1. Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500-1800* (1977) and Randolph Trumbach, *The Rise of the Egalitarian Family* (1978). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Susan Staves, *Married Women's Separate Property in England, 1660-1833* (1990). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Amanda J. Vickery, "Golden Age to Separate Spheres: a Review of the Categories and Chronology of English women's History," *Historical Journal* 36, 2 (1993) pp. 383-414. [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Leonore Davidoff, "Regarding some old husband's Tales: Public and Private in Feminist History," in her *Worlds Between. Historical Perspectives on Gender and Class* (1995) p. 228. [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. For an example of the domestic education appropriate to each rank, see Sarah Scott, *History of Sir George Ellison*. 766) vol. 1 of 2, p. 263. [Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Anna Clark, *Women's Silence, Men's Violence: Sexual Assault in Britain, 1770-1845* (1987); *The Struggle for the Breeches: Gender and the Making of the British Working Class* (1995). [Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Margaret Hunt, *The Middling Sort: Commerce Gender and the Family in England, 1680-1780* (1996) pp. 31, 215. [Back to \(7\)](#)
8. Gary Kelly, *Women, Writing, and Revolution. 1790-1827* (1993) p. 3. [Back to \(8\)](#)
9. Linda Colley's book is *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707- 1837* (1992) [Back to \(9\)](#)
10. Dror Wahrman, "National Society, Communal Culture," *Social History* 17, 1 (Jan. 1992) pp. 43-72. [Back to \(10\)](#)
11. Leonore Davidoff, *The Best Circles. Society, Etiquette and the Season* (1973), John Smail, *The Origins of Middle-class Culture* (1994). [Back to \(11\)](#)
12. Elaine Chalus, "That epidemical Madness': Women and electoral politics in the late eighteenth century," in Hannah Larker and Elaine Chalus, eds., *Gender in Eighteenth Century England: Roles, Representations and Responsibilities* (199). [Back to \(12\)](#)
13. Dror Wahrman, *Imagining the Middle Class: The Political Representation of Class in Britain, c. 1780- 1840* (1995). [Back to \(13\)](#)
14. Clare Midgeley, *Women against Slavery. The British Campaigns, 1780-1870* (1992). [Back to \(14\)](#)

The author has accepted the review but regrets that she is unable to enter into any dialogue due to outstanding commitments.

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