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The Bluestocking Circle – as a new paradigm of collective collaboration

Abstract

This article explores the phenomenon of the Bluestocking literary society that came into being in the second half of the eighteenth century. Founded by wealthy and independently minded philanthropists, the literary discussion club grew into an important network of intellectuals who managed to enhance the female visibility in the public realm and played an important role in the combating gender stereotypes. In times when women were relegated to the domestic spheres and men engaged themselves in hot-headed political disputation those literary receptions provided not only a welcome distraction but also grew into a new paradigm of social intercourse.

The article also investigates the rise, development and decline of the Bluestocking circle, through a close analysis of the lives and works of three women, who made the corpus of the group: Elizabeth Vesey, Elizabeth Montague and Elizabeth Carter.

Keywords: *the Bluestocking society, educational movement, Elizabeth Montagu, Elizabeth Vesey, Elizabeth Carter, network of intellectuals*

Abstrakt

Niniejszy artykuł zgłębia fenomen środowiska literackiego noszącego angielską nazwę Bluestocking, które powstało w drugiej połowie osiemnastego wieku. Założony przez zamożne i światłe filantropki, literacki klub dyskusyjny przekształcił się w sieć wpływowych intelektualistów, którzy zdołali wzmocnić pozycje kobiet w przestrzeni publicznej oraz odegrali zasadniczą rolę w walce ze stereotypami dotyczącymi płci. W czasach, kiedy rola kobiety ograniczała się do sfery domowej, a mężczyźni angażowali się w gorączkowe spory polityczne, te literackie spotkania stanowiły nie tylko mile widzianą odskocznnię ale także przerodziły się w nowy paradygmat stosunków społecznych.

Artykuł przedstawia również powstanie, rozwój i upadek towarzystwa Bluestocking poprzez gruntowną analizę biografii oraz dzieł trzech kobiet, które stanowiły korpus tej grupy: Elizabeth Montagu, Elizabeth Vesey i Elizabeth Carter.

Słowa kluczowe: *towarzystwo Bluestocking, ruch edukacyjny, sieć intelektualistów, Elizabeth Montagu, Elizabeth Vesey, Elizabeth Carter*

The eighteenth century was particularly prosperous for the British Empire. The Acts of Union led to the formation of the Kingdom of Great Britain. The Industrial Revolution and the Agricultural Revolution enabled many people to move from the country to the new cities to find new opportunities (Carter, 2001, p. 77). At the same time some went to live in the new colonies in America. Being an observant journalist of his epoch, Daniel Defoe seemed to capture aptly the spirit of the era boasting: "we are most diligent nation in the world. Vast trade, rich manufacturers, mighty wealth, universal correspondence, and happy success have been constant companions of England, and given us the title of an industrious people" (Hoppit, 2000, p. 334). Over the course of time, however, the threat of revolution was lurking in the air. It seems that both the signing of the United States Declaration of Independence in 1776, and later the outbreak of the French Revolution of 1789 exuberated a successful emergence "of a new mood of freedom and the spirit of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity" (Carter, 2001, p. 77).

The context of prosperity seems to affect the concepts of masculinity and femininity enabling women to embark upon a social and cultural recovery. In terms of defining gender roles, at its outset, the Enlightenment was a male-dominated world. Due to clear class distinctions, women, excluded from the public sphere, were relegated to the realms of home life where they had no choice but to focus on domestic pursuits. "At this time, women were the continual victims of social and economic discrimination. Upper- and middle-class women's choices were limited to marriage and motherhood, or spinsterhood. Both choices resulted in domestic dependency" (Cruea, 2005). The ideal of marriage in the 18th century described by W. L. Blease seems to confirm this concept. In her discourse concerning *The Emancipation of English Women* she noticed: "A respectable woman was nothing but the potential mother of children" (p. 8).

Moreover, the insight into the concepts of gender and equality, or rather the lack of the latter would not have been possible without John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) and *Two Treatises of Government* (1690). Despite his claim that all people born into this world are equal, Locke urged women to acknowledge their subjection in the patriarchal

society: "God, (...) gives not, that I see, any authority to Adam over Eve, or to men over their wives, but only foretells what should be the woman's lot, how by this providence he would order it so that she should be subject to her husband, as we see that generally the laws of mankind and customs of nations have ordered it so" (Locke, 1969, p. 37).

The male superiority was also visible in literature (Carter, 2001, p. 77). "With the growth of the new middle classes, there was an increasing demand for the printed word, and writing became a profession" (Carter, 2001, p. 96). The novel grew into the most popular literary genre meeting the increasing demands of the middle classes for reading subjects related to their everyday experiences (Carter, 2001, p. 96). "Daniel Defoe and Jonathan Swift, followed a little later by Samuel Richardson and Henry Fielding, were the most important male names in the story of the rise of the novel" (Carter, 2001, p. 79).

The popularity of the novel and the development of printing as well as the growing demands of reading public brought a boom in journalism, in magazines and newspapers (Sampson, 1949, p. 396). Most of the great writers of the time became famous journalists and their essays concerning topical issues were not only informative or entertaining but also were setting standards of taste and judgement, and influencing the values of the society they wrote for and about (Carter, 2001, p. 96). Thus printed journalism expanded into *The Gentleman's Journal*, *The Gentleman's Magazine*, *The Tattler*, and *The Spectator*, which represented the tastes of gentlemen of that time such as Richard Steele, Joseph Addison, Sir Roger de Coverley and served as the mirrors reflecting the social and emotional awareness (Carter, 2001, p. 96). As Doctor Samuel Johnson aptly noticed, their essays: "proved to be very influential in the forming of eighteenth-century tastes" (Carter, 2001, p. 98).

Taking into account the fact that in the 18th century every aspect of English life was influenced by gender, it seems that in this predominantly male literary culture the situation of women was rather precarious and many a time they were challenged with expressing themselves. To reinforce this argument George Sampson noted: "During the first half of the eighteenth century, Englishwomen had little education and even less intellectual status" (Sampson, 1949, p. 615). Fortunately, in the course of time a slight shift in perceptions about gender roles occurred. It seems that all the three phenomena of the century mentioned above, such as technical progress, the growth of the new middle classes and the popularity of the novel had a major contribution to the social changes and the perception of women within society.

In the early eighteenth century writing became a profession. Owing to that women could not only be the greatest part of the readership, but also they co-

uld respectably earn an income and do important cultural work (Tompkins, 1985, xi). There is no doubt that the popularity of the novel "as a genre created a new set of publishing possibilities for the literary woman, hence new possibilities for the public woman" (Matthews, 1992, p. 72). Apparently women grew stronger to combat mental suppression imposed by patriarchal society and eagerly participate in intellectual discourse. In seeking to achieve these objectives, bright, learned and sociable Englishwomen attempted to create a circle in which intelligent conversation took place (Sampson, 1949, p. 615). This literary club was founded by Elizabeth Vesey, Frances Boscawen and Elizabeth Montagu and adopted the name the 'Bluestocking Circle'.

The bluestocking assemblies seem to bear little resemblance to their male counterparts. At that time clubs (or coffee houses) – the Royal Society, the Scribblers Club, the Lunar Society, and Mr Spectator's fictitious club – were all exclusively male (Lynch, 2016, p. 250). At such venues, gentlemen engaged themselves in discussions concerning current affairs, business and political issues and long sessions of playing cards, whereas a group of independently minded women decided to redeem "Society" from such idle chatter and gambling (Melikian, 2008).

Those literary assemblies adopted the term 'the bluestocking clubs'. It seems that the label derives its origin from the outcome of the conversation that took place between Mrs. Elizabeth Vesey, the hostess of the literary evenings and a learned botanist, translator and publisher Benjamin Stillingfleet (Melikian, 2008). Being invited to one of "celebrated literary *conversazione*" (Theatre, 2006, p. 214), he declined an invitation on the grounds that he could not 'afford the white silk stockings that were the usual evening wear in polite companies' (Theatre, 2006, p. 214). In return, Mrs. Vesey exclaimed: "Don't mind dress; come in your blue stockings" (Sampson, 1949, p. 615). The implication was that intelligent and stimulating conversation was more important than dress code. Stillingfleet obeyed her and since that time he became a frequent guest of these literary chitchats. Moreover, his popularity grew and "such was the excellence of his conversation, that it came to be said, we can do nothing without the blue stockings, and thus, by degrees, the title was established" (Boswell, 1986).

Unlike the popular coffee houses, these evening parties drew together a wide range of people of both sexes with literary interests – "duchesses, lords, knights, and ladies" (Ward, 2000, p. 296), as well as artists, musicians, botanists and politicians. "There was no ceremony, no cards, and no supper" (Ward, 2000, p. 296) and people from different social ladders that had hitherto been kept apart could mingle, talk and freely participate in social interaction (Theatre, 2006, p. 214).

Two of the most prominent bluestocking hostesses that offered most distinguished company were Elizabeth Vesey and Elizabeth Montagu (Knowles, 2004). The former was wife of Agmondesham Vesey, a member of the Irish parliament, and daughter of Sir Thomas Vesey, bishop of Ossory (Ward, 2000, p. 296). With her taste for literature, delight in sophisticated discussions and imaginative nature, Vesey became best beloved bluestocking hostess (Ward, 2000, p. 296). Due to the lack of published work on her part, her intellectual image might be traceable through the scope of her intimates' accounts (Stefanelli, 2013, p. 324). In 1786, Hannah More published a poem, "Le bas bleu, or Conversation" which she opened with words: "Vesey! Of verse the judge and friend! Awhile my idle strain attend" (Stefanelli, 2013, p. 325). The poem praised Mrs. Vesey's critical abilities and literary competence.

Among the circle of Mrs. Vesey's devoted friends was also Elizabeth Carter, who dedicated her a poem, "To Mrs. Vesey" (1766). The first lines of the poem start with: "Silent and cool the Dews of Evening fall, / Hussh'd is the vernal Music of the Groves" (Carter, 1766, p. 94) and indicated that Mrs. Vesey's epitomized "genteel woman, active agent of civilization", who offered asylum from earthly matters and invited to contemplation upon the immortality of art (Theatre, 2006, p. 216). Carter was perfectly aware of Vesey's outstanding intellectual gifts and "literary wisdom". In a letter of 1779, Carter expressed her disappointment about Vesey's negligence to inform her of writing a Pindaric ode. She complained in the letter: "you should have read it in an assembly-room, to the admiration of all who did understand it" (Pennington, 1809, p. 235-236). Obviously, the passage indicated that Mrs. Vesey's literary competence stemmed also from the legacy of the classical world. Her literary wit was also visible in a correspondence with Elizabeth Montagu. When Montagu published anonymously in 1769 *An Essay on the Writings and Genius of Shakespeare*, Vesey did not fail to detect the author's proper name as she wrote: "And you my dear let me be at peace I am better diverted with reading this essay upon Shakespeare – a clever fellow I wish you had put your name to it" (Bourke, 2002, p. 636).

It seems, however, that the most crucial aspect of Mrs. Vesey's literary engagement can be linked to her significant collection of books, which consisted of "one thousand and eighty-one volumes" and contained works with historical, philosophical, theological and pedagogical background (Keenan, 2003). At a time "when Ireland had only two public libraries and a few private ones", the Irish lady's collection was unprecedented (Stefanelli, 2013, p. 326). Among the most remarkable books in Vesey's library, one could spot Shakespeare's *Works* (Lynch, 2016, p. 1743-1746), John Locke's *Es-*

say on Human Understanding (1748), J. J. Rousseau's *Les Pensees* (1766) or Machiavelli's *Works* (1550) – publications that constituted an inevitable component of her literary competence (Stefanelli, 2013, p. 326). What is more, it appears that Mrs. Vesey's interaction with literature could not go unnoticed by eminent personalities of the day such as Jonathan Swift, Samuel Johnson or Edmund Burke who had a high regard for the bluestocking lady and many a time attended her assemblies (Stefanelli, 2013, p. 329).

Although Mrs. Vesey originated bluestocking circles, the real "Queen of the Blues" was Mrs. Elizabeth Montagu, who due to being the richest woman in England (at that time) managed to turn her wealth into cultural capital (Vickery, 2008)). Her colossal wealth enabled her to support failing friends and encourage rising talents (Sampson, 1949, p. 615). Among the contemporaries who swelled the ranks of Montagu's guests was for instance Dr. James Beattie. Due to financial problems and deteriorating health, Dr. Beattie in 1771, went to London, where Dr. Gregory introduced him to Mrs. Montagu. 'Never, certainly, was an author more plentifully rewarded with fame than was Beattie for his *Essay on Truth*. He received a degree at Oxford and was ordered to Kew Green, where he had an interview with George III. and his queen. Beattie received also the more substantial benefit of a pension' (Whorton, 1890, p. 228).

Thus the leading minds of the day, such as Samuel Johnson, Sir Joshua Reynolds, Edmund Burke and Horace Walpole, flocked eagerly to her assemblies being aware of receiving appropriate patronage and recognition. A canny businesswoman, Montagu negotiated with booksellers and publishers on behalf of the writers she favoured, and even set up annuities (Vickery, 2008). Nevertheless, it was not the wealth or social position that she valued but competence and talent. She "chose her friends for their merits, not for their station; yet she had all society to choose from" (Warton, 1890, p. 226).

What is more, this new paradigm of social interaction cultivated by lady Montagu revised assumptions about the gender roles in literary world (Theatre, 2006, p. 214). Apparently, "the bluestockings used their friendships and patronage to resist or subvert the limits placed on women by convention. They opened up a space for women to succeed in the cultural marketplace" (Vickery, 2008). Among those who became more conspicuous to the public eye were "the linguist Elizabeth Carter, the poet Anna Laetitia Barbauld, the artist Angelica Kauffman, the playwright Hannah More, the novelist Elizabeth Griffith and the historian Catharine Macaulay" (Vickery, 2008). There was no doubt that in that enduring struggle of the intelligent women with the world monopolised by men, their friendship, collective collabora-

tion and mutual support in intellectual endeavours that were cherished on an unprecedented scale, "allowed them to assert literary and artistic independence" (Eger, 208, p. 55).

Unlike Mrs. Vesey, Mrs. Montagu was herself an active author (Sampson, 1949, p.615). Her chief work, which had its day was the *Essay on the Writings and Genius of Shakespeare with some Remarks upon the Misrepresentation of Mons. De Voltaire* (1769) (Sampson, 1949, p. 541). The *Essay*, in which Elizabeth defended Shakespeare's writings against a previously published attack by Voltaire, not only brought her substantial attention among contemporaries (not only positive ones, like in case of Dr. Samuel Johnson's negative review) but also served as a vehicle to increase public awareness about women's inferior position within society. Henceforth, she was no longer only an organizer of literary parties for persons of 'congenial tastes and pursuits', but a recognizable female literary critic who made a large contribution to the emerging tradition of women's writing (Wharton, 1890, p. 225) Furthermore, since then "the dominant, male-oriented canon of criticism" (Brasser, 2013) began to be juxtaposed with female discourse.

In order to draw attention to the issues concerning education, Montagu emphasized that Shakespeare was a genius despite his lack of education. She wrote: "Our author [Shakespeare], by following minutely the chronicles of the times, has embarrassed his drams with too great a number of persons and events. The hurly-burly of these plays recommended them to a rude, illiterate audience, who, as he says, loved a noise of targets. His poverty, and the low conditions of the stage (which at that time was not frequented by persons of rank), obliged him to this complaisance; and, unfortunately, he had not been tutored by any rules of art, or informed by acquaintance with just and regular dramas" (Knight, 1851, p. 542). Montagu concluded that what constituted Shakespearean authority and authenticity was by all means not a strict adherence to the classical models of drama but his "overall virtue and ability to engage the audience's emotion" (Callaghan, 2016, p. 35).

It is also necessary to underline the fact that the *Essay* was published anonymously, but soon Montagu's identity was revealed and it stirred another debate over the gender of learning (Theatre, 2006, p. 214). She claimed that women like herself deserved a complete education that would inevitably "encroach on male prerogative" (Barney, 1999, p. 79). In exploring the connections between rhetorical theories and education that were investigated through the scope of her comparative study of biographies of the Roman rhetorician Cicero and his friend Atticus, Montagu became a great supporter of rhetorical education (Smith, 2008). Such rhetorical education ar-

articulated "both the public and private oral and written discourse", where participants could interact with others 'within their private and public social contexts' (Smith, 2008). In other words, the very notion of rhetorical education emphasized studying through "reading, letter-writing, informal conversation and disputation." (Smith, 2008) Taking into account the fact that women were excluded from formal education, Montagu transformed her literary chit-chats into 'informal' schools, where "her male and female friends and relatives could learn such rhetoric together through interacting with each other in the academies of private reading, sociable conversation and letter-writing." (Smith, 2008)

Women's rhetorical discourse promoted by the Bluestocking salon was apparently a turning point in the history of gender roles as it contributed to "an increasing number of Enlightenment women", who began to gain recognition, support and acceptance not only from their female friends but also from their male relatives (Smith, 2008). Female ethos was no longer defined only in terms of 'chastity, piety and modesty'(Smith, 2008), but also in terms of wit, eloquence and intellectual aspirations. As a result, the assumptions about female education began to shift and although they did not lead to "recognition of education as a woman's right' but rather resulted in acknowledging it as a lady's privilege" (Theatre, 2006, p. 215). A close friend of Montagu, Hester Chapone aptly encapsulated that spirit of compromise in the field of studying, when *On the Improvement of the Mind* she declared herself so aware of the "danger of pedantry and presumption in a women" that she feared ever "seeing her girl remarkable for learning" (Theatre, 2006, p. 216).

Montagu's intellectual pursuits, fascination with rhetorical tradition and unconventional attitude towards life (which, in fact, reflected the bluestockings' concepts) were also transmitted via voluminous correspondence. As maintained by Dina El-Hindi: "letter writing gave females of the period a 'voice', when they normally would not be heard. It was a way for them to be heard without opposing society" (El-Hidi, 2016, p. 158). Apparently, Mrs. Montagu took a full advantage of that genre. Elizabeth Eger reported that there were 6,923 letters in Montagu's correspondence and the Huntington Library's Montagu collection contained 3,300 by Elizabeth Montagu (Eger, 1999, p. 57). Obviously she formed large – scale correspondence network that encouraged epistolary proliferation. "Her letters engaged in literary, education, religious, and even political discourse which had an influence on the men and women in her circle" (Smith, 2008). Elizabeth Eger claimed that in Montegu letters one could notice her "manipulating the market for-

ces of the literary profession, for herself and on behalf of others and creating a literary community of both sexes" (Eger, 1999, p. 56). Her correspondence revealed Montagu's close relations with most influential people of that time including Edmund Burke, Gilbert West, David Garrick, Lord Lyttelton or Lady Margaret Cavendish Harley (Smith, 2008). This "republic of letters" was apparently another tool, by means of which Montague's revolutionary issues came to light. Oscillating between the public and private "realms of literary discourse", letters obviously transcended the private/public binary (Eger, 1999, p. 57). Gender relations could no longer be perceived in terms of strict male/female dichotomy but in terms of collective identity. The idea of an individual genius was substituted by artistic community (Eger, 2010).

What is more, nowhere did Mrs. Montagu show her true nature better than in her epistolary forms. "She was a combination of the romantic and the realist, the bluestocking and the business woman, the collector of celebrities and the plain everyday woman" (Jones, 1948, p. 97). Rebecca West seemed to sustain that image claiming: "Mrs. Montague had elected to live the classical life by the calm application of wisdom; her country informed her that it was proper to do so. But she was a romantic by temperament" (Jones, 1948, p. 87). Apparently it stemmed from the fact that she was fascinated with older English literature; for instance, she wrote about Richard Hurd's *Letters on Chivalry and Romance* or King Arthur's round table, as well as Gothic mythology, Celtic and Oriental poems engrossed much of her attention. "Never was my imagination so amazed" confessed Montagu in her letter to Mrs. Carter (Jones, 1948, p. 90). It seems that in the light of such fascination with Romanticism it was Montague's prerogative to uphold imagination over reason (Jones, 1948, p. 91). The incorporation of such revolutionary assumptions at The Age of Reason was hazardous for aspiring female critic, however, inserting them into epistolary framework again enabled her to convey them without the intervention of a society's restrictions on voicing taboo thoughts.

Although Elizabeth Montagu's undertakings contributed to a relaxation of patriarchal constraints and the enhancing of the visibility of female virtue it is necessary to underline the fact that labelling the bluestockings as feminists ought to be done with caution. A valid argument in favour of this assumption could be Carter's and Montagu's "fascination with accounts of historical development in which gender is revealed to be remarkable fluid over time and the gender hierarchy is revealed as historically contingent" (Theatre, 2006, p. 216). What is more, Montagu's concept of rhetorical identity was based on classical and culturally masculine models of Cicero and

Atticus. Furthermore, correspondence exchanged between Carter and Montagu revealed that "for virtue to have a chance of prevailing in public life all women must remain private beings" (Theatre, 2006, p. 216).

Of the bluestocking assemblies none was, however, more 'beautifully blue' than Mrs. Elizabeth Carter: unmarried, but called Mrs. in accordance with contemporary custom (Sampson, 1949, p. 615). Being the daughter of Nicolas Carter, the preacher at Canterbury and an accomplished linguist, she was engaged in education from the early years of life. Despite difficulties that stemmed from her domestic responsibilities, she persisted and managed to acquire a solid knowledge of French, Latin, Greek, Hebrew as well as Italian, German, Portuguese and Arabic (Ward, 2000, p. 24). By no means she was an outstanding female who was ahead of her time. Yet, she was also a woman and her intellectual capacity as well as an aspiration to step into the public realm was regarded as a transgression against a society's laws (Freeman, 2019, p. 121). Upon hearing of her (informal) educational attainment, Samuel Jonson declared: "A man is in general better pleased when he has a good dinner upon his table, than when his wife talks Greek" (Howkins, 1961, p. 205). Against all odds, however, Elizabeth Carter strived to be worthy of public recognition and Samuel Johnson, who became her friend until his death, had to confess, that "he understood Greek better than anyone whom he had ever known, excerpt Elizabeth Carter" (Pennington, 1816, p. 13). Among her greatest intellectual accomplishments was her involvement in translation of the Odes of Horace and the works of the Greek Stoic philosopher Epictetus (Minerva, 2009). The latter work was rendered so well that it not only brought her fame and fortune but also remained the standard works for centuries (Lezard, 2005). What is more, such outstanding was her knowledge in the field of the classical languages, that she even managed to detect a fault in a line of Homer (Ward, 2000, p. 24).

The significance of Carter's achievement, particularly Epictetus, was also appreciated by Mrs. Montague, as Carter assisted her in writing her essay on Shakespeare (Minerva, 2009). The bluestocking network of minded people brought Carter a wide circle of friends and acquaintances including James Boswell, Edmund Burke or Horace Walpole (Minerva, 2009). The active participation in literary endeavours proved to be fruitful, as it led to her voluminous correspondence with Elizabeth Vesey and Elizabeth Montagu, which revealed that their long-lasting mutual friendship served as a catalyst for Carter's intellectual development (Minerva, 2009). On November 23, 1777, Elizabeth Carter wrote to her friend Elizabeth Montagu: "One thing is very particularly agreeable to my heart, that is you and I are al-

ways to figure in the literary world together, and that from the classical poet, the water drinking rhymes, to the highest dispenser of human fame" (Carter, *Letters* (1817), p. 47). "In her experience of friendship' – claimed Fazlollahi, "in defining her world of moral values, Carter found individual, spiritual, and intellectual freedom. Finding freedom in relationships with her intellectual friends became a key aspect of the poet's individual, spiritual, moral, and intellectual satisfaction (Fazlollahi, 2011, p. 83).

In terms of gender roles, Elizabeth Carter aptly noticed that patriarchal hierarchy was also rendered and sustained via the process of translation. A strong argument in favour of such claim could be her dispute with archbishop Secker over the translation of two verses in *Corinthians* (Ward, 2000, p. 297). Comparing the New Testament in Greek and English, Carter noticed that "when it was applied to the husband, the translators rendered the verb in an active form; when applied to the woman they rendered it passive. For Carter, this was a sign of their (translators) support for the superiority of the husband; it demonstrated that translation was not neutral nor was it gender blind" (Lezard, 2005). After consulting the original, the archbishop confessed she was right (Ward, 2000, p. 297).

It seems beyond any doubt, however, that in the context of eighteenth century strict gender conformity, Carter's aspiration to achieve public visibility had to be done with respect to the perception of normative gender roles (Freeman, 2010, p. 127) and many a time her scholarly labour had to be substituted for household chores. Even her working on the *Epictetus* translation was interrupted by domestic responsibilities as she complained in the latter to Mrs. Talbot: "I have been working my eyes out in making shirts for my brother" (Pennington, 1816, p. 186). On another occasion, in order to enhance her 'feminine accomplishments' Carter spent a year in Canterbury in order to master needlework and embroidery (Minerva, 2009). Among her domestic duties was also the education of her stepbrother, Henry, whom she managed to prepare for Cambridge (Minerva, 2009). Her subjection to social constraints was also visible in an introduction to *Epictetus*, where for fear of being censured, she "added an introduction and footnotes stressing the superiority of Christianity" (Minerva, 2009).

The Bluestocking assemblies were at their prime until 1785. After this time, they sank into oblivion. Elizabeth Montagu died in 1800, Elizabeth Vesey in 1785 and Elizabeth Carter in 1806. (Sampson, 1949, p. 615). The French revolution and the tremendous influence of romanticism reinforced conservative ideologies marginalizing women to the domestic sphere. A public sphere and a private one became again perceived as categories mu-

tually exclusive. "A woman could not be learned and be a lady at the same time" (Freeman, 2010, p. 126). Any attempts of educational pursuits initiated by females were ridiculed and mocked. The modest progress in female learning was swept by Romantic writers such as Lord Byron, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Hazlitt who many a time criticized the bluestocking movement. On one occasion Hazlitt declared: "I do not care a fig for any woman that knows even what an author means." Byron satirised the movement in his poem *Don Juan* and Coleridge "proclaimed his loathing for all Bluestockingism" (Swallow, 2014, p. 92). Apparently an educated women did not fit in any more with "the romantic notion of damsel in distress waiting to be rescued by a knight in a shining armour" (Swallow, 2014, p. 92). A patriarchal social order was re-established and the female intellectual was perceived as a violation of social laws and conventions (Freeman, 2010, p. 121). By the end of the century, "*bluestocking* became to be a derogatory term" (Swallow, 2014, p. 91). Nevertheless, their legacies endured and such women as Mary Wollstonecraft and Hannah More were credited with saving the 'blue' virtues from oblivion (Swallow, 2014, p. 91).

To conclude, it ought to be admitted that the bluestockings did much to diffuse a general interest in literature and they "helped to make society more decent" (Sampson, 1949, p. 616). Serving as bearers of civilization and progress, they created productive literary milieu where talented people could avail themselves of some of the best minds of their time. Their innovative use of patronage, conversation and correspondence enabled the bluestocking ladies to forge a gender-free community that provided the basis for women's literary canon. Owing to their respect to the normative gender roles, they managed to implement cultural changes without being accused of transgression, which was unprecedented at that time (Freeman, 2010, p. 127). On the contrary, they began to be perceived as cultural exemplars, and their writing was "read as honouring a code of moral probity centred on rational reflection, an Anglican piety and philanthropy" (Theatre, 2006, p. 2016).

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