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Review of *The Domestic Revolution: Enlightenment Feminisms and the Novel*

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Eve Tavor Bannet, *The Domestic Revolution: Enlightenment Feminisms and the Novel*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000. 304 pp. ISBN 0801864178 (paper).

Reviewed by Julie Park, Princeton University

The main territory of Eve Tavor Bannet's *The Domestic Revolution* is Enlightenment England and its subjects, the "public women"—Charlotte Smith, Mary Wollstonecraft, Hannah More, Jane West, Mary Hays and many others—who wrote novels, treatises and conduct books that redefined notions about the home, the family, and therein women's power. Bringing into focus works by a number of eighteenth-century women writers who are still seldom read, heard of or taught (and bypassed in favor of Richardson or Austen) within the context of eighteenth-century novel studies, Bannet's book reinvigorates a frequently neglected corpus through a political critique that ties together dominant Enlightenment ideologies with its feminist counterparts. In constructing a history of women's lives in eighteenth-century England with a view toward revising such trademark topics in gender criticism as "domesticity," Bannet's book also joins two other recent works, Amanda Vickery's *The Gentleman's Daughter* (1998) and Harriet Guest's *Small Change* (2000).

For this recent wave of eighteenth-century feminist scholars, perhaps the most operative turn in their acts of revision consists of challenging and at times rejecting outright (as Vickery does) the conceptual division between the "private" and the "public." This classic binary, used predominantly to schematize and apportion the social roles of men and women—the public "sphere" has always belonged to men, the private to women—has tended to obscure the complex language of gender in eighteenth-century terms. Far more permeable and less rigid than previous scholarship has made it out to be, public and private distinctions in eighteenth-century England often folded into each other. Indeed, remaining inseparable in their mutual influences and effects, the terms, more often than not, were used to anchor the main sense of contrast between other dichotomies, morphing endlessly as they did so.

At stake in allowing for more flexibility in the public/private binary is an opportunity to perceive the ways in which women, throughout the age of Enlightenment, took command of deeply significant social arenas. In Bannet's case, the emphasis lies more in showing how certain arenas involving the very notion of domesticity and dominion of the family have been mistakenly viewed as having always belonged to women. Lockean ideology—after and in tension with Filmer—about the analogy between the family and the state bears out the patriarchal foundations of family government. For Bannet, who wears her own feminist investments plainly, the public women (i.e., women who published their writing) of eighteenth-century England carry enormous responsibility for the way home life and the family became women's sphere of influence and have become etched in our own consciousness as "women's space." It is these feminists who, inscribing "themselves in the lacunae of Enlightenment ideology" (6), paradoxically "invented" the notions of domesticity "that many women in the late twentieth century fled and to which others desire to return" (2).

Unlike Guest, who sketches a more understated and gradated image of women's growing realm of power in eighteenth-century culture ("small change," she calls it), Bannet, as the title of her book and long-range glances at recent feminist issues suggest, opts for a bolder depiction. While for many at least three revolutions—the Glorious Revolution of 1688, the American Revolution and the French Revolution (she makes no mention of scientific revolutions)—distinguish the long eighteenth century, the radical shift of domestic power from men to women has yet to achieve recognition. Such dramatic positioning—as questionable as any formulation of "revolution" or "invention" in a given historical terrain tends to be—falls out of a procedure that emerges as the book's main strength, her assiduous re-readings of groundbreaking political texts through the works of their feminist respondents.

In Chapter 1, for example, plotting the way Locke's arguments in *Two Discourses on Government* were followed, disputed and re-shaped by such writers as Mary Astell and Damaris Masham in the late seventeenth century and Mary Hays and Hannah More in the late eighteenth century, Bannet not only constructs a rich genealogy of eighteenth-century feminisms, but also demonstrates the interpenetrations between political language and eighteenth-century constructions of domesticity. If Locke's *Discourses* was read in the eighteenth century as a document of the Glorious Revolution, arguing on one hand that "all that share in the same common Nature, Faculty and Powers, are in Nature equal, and ought to partake in the same common Rights and Privileges," its re-modelings by Enlightenment feminists throughout the long eighteenth century produced another revolutionary movement. These feminists, according to Bannet, radically challenged and re-structured Locke's most cherished ideals for self-government by demanding that women be included in the "all" that possess reason, understanding and "natural faculties" (32).

Her prolonged meditations notwithstanding on how Enlightenment feminists conversed with writings by such prominent men of letters and ideas as Burke, Rousseau and Adam Smith, the central opponents in Bannet's account of eighteenth-century gender politics are not men and women. Rather, they consist of the two camps of feminists she calls Matriarchs and Egalitarians. Distinguishing between the Matriarchs as those writers (e.g., Hannah More, Jane West, Frances Brooke, Sarah Scott and Mary Astell) who believed in the superiority of women over men, and the Egalitarians (e.g., Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Hays and Charlotte Smith) as those who insisted on the fundamental equality between men and women, Bannet's labels attempt to break binaries used in previous studies. Her predominating example is Janet Todd's division between "conservative" and "radical/liberal" eighteenth-century women writers in *The Sign of Angellica* (1989), an influential precedent that, Bannet points out, confines its early modern feminist subjects to labels and positions that the patriarchy itself held. Adhering to the labels of "conservative and liberal camps made it harder to flesh out the domestic ideologies of public women as distinct from those of public men, even while it occluded the ground that Enlightenment feminists shared" (5). While one might accurately determine that the Matriarchs were more conservative than the Egalitarians—the Matriarchs supported hierarchical societies and the monarchy, while the Egalitarians rushed to embrace such causes as the French Revolution—they both promoted the crucial objective of women's self-government.

Even as Bannet remains attentive to the fluidity of shared beliefs and terms in the Matriarchs' and Egalitarians' purportedly divided approaches, such as their emphases on different terms that

embodied similar ideals—“virtue,” for instance meant “the Enlightenment virtues of sympathy and benevolence” for the Egalitarians, and “the Christian virtues of patience, charity and chastity” for the Matriarchs (49)—her labels sometimes end up recapitulating the rigidifying effects of binaries. This becomes especially apparent in her handling of novels, a medium that she places in the foreground of her study yet negotiates with less interpretive range and suppleness than the political theories themselves.

For this reason, the stronger features of her book lie in the sections where she foregoes novels to discuss such matters as the Hardwicke Marriage Act and its consequences for sexual relationships as well as women’s social legibility, as she does in Chapter 3. Another incisive discussion that speaks to her considerable strengths as a literary reader of political history arises in Chapter 4, where she unpacks the intricate language of the public and the private in Enlightenment ideas of domestic government. Among the crucial distinctions she illuminates is the use of “private” to also mean the particular as opposed to the “general” or “common,” as well as the prevailingly analogical relationship between “the economy of a private family and the economy of a nation” (129, 136). Both Chapters 3 and 4 develop compellingly the notion that the public and private were intensely entwined and endlessly convertible. Public policies such as the Marriage Act could not help but shape and change the features of private relationships and identities. Furthermore, careful assessments of how eighteenth-century texts from Hutcheson to Hume, Beattie and Steuart used such words as “domestic, private, public, family, society” show not only how the words “occupied different signifying spaces than they do now,” but also, how the language of private family life was “central to social and political thought,” and vice versa (127). It is only through studying these features of eighteenth-century England’s political landscape that Bannet can effectively assert the impact her feminist subjects had in challenging and revising the prevailing domestic ideologies of their time. Interestingly, many of these feminists also wrote novels and, indeed, used them as “vehicles” and “instruments” for their political ideas.

If one of the “revolutionary” qualities of the eighteenth-century novel as a newly popular literary genre was its ability to convey individual subjectivity like no other medium before it, then what might its connection be to the seemingly public modalities of political thought that Bannet shows are actually private ones too in eighteenth-century England? To a certain extent, Nancy Armstrong has already explored and opened the question of the novel’s properties of inwardness and its relationship with “the rise” of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century domesticity in *Desire and Domestic Fiction* (1987). Yet, the same question of how the eighteenth-century English novel’s constitution of “the private regions of the self”—to use Armstrong’s phrase—worked in relationship with sexual and political formations might still be usefully posed in Bannet’s study, especially since she revises some conceptual drawbacks in Armstrong’s. These include the homogenizing effects of Armstrong’s wide-angle focus on both eighteenth- and nineteenth-century texts and ideologies, as well as the anachronism of Armstrong’s prevailing doctrine of “separate spheres.”

The question of psychic life as an aspect of “the private” and a critical feature of the eighteenth-century novel never enters into Bannet’s discussion. Maintaining that “important work” has already been done in eighteenth-century novel studies that focus on defining novel and romance, fact and fiction, and the differences between male and female Gothic, Romanticism and

sensibility, she stakes out her territory as one that follows “questions relating to exemplarity” (12). Exemplarity, she explains, remains a key concept in her work because the novels she assesses all produce their political critiques through a narrative convention that provides models of proper conduct and ideal outcomes for readers to imitate. Though she devotes earlier sections of her book to developing a theory of exemplarity—a tradition that goes back to the Renaissance—and its relationship to the production of eighteenth-century novels, drawing on the ideas of Mrs. Barbauld, Samuel Johnson, Clara Reeve, and Hugh Blair, she unfortunately never assimilates these findings to her own readings. Novelistic form and expression become subordinated to and estranged from political message, especially when the conceptual framework she uses to ground her political analysis directs her interpretations of individual novels. Halfway through Chapter 2 she announces, “In what follows, Egalitarian and Matriarchal novels will be fastened into groups by the ways they used the formulae and conventions of exemplary narratives to rewrite family society and alter the social text” (73).

Throughout the rest of her book, Bannet does not diverge from this method of fastening. As a consequence, plot summaries (albeit riveting and entertaining) of such novels as Amelia Opie’s *Adeline Mowbray* (1804), Frances Brooke’s *Lady Julia Mandeville* (1762) and *The Excursion* (1777) or Frances Sheridan’s *Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph* (1761) function as proofs for demonstrating what kind of feminist their authors were, Egalitarian or Matriarchal. Within this overpowering system, such well-known works as Frances Burney’s *Evelina* (1778)—puzzlingly spelled Evalina throughout Bannet’s book—becomes reduced to an Egalitarian novel and Austen’s *Emma* and *Mansfield Park* become Matriarchal ones. When she claims that “Matriarchal and Egalitarian novelists conducted their debates with each other by countering each other’s examples and rewriting each other’s narrative scenarios” (12) she makes a legitimate point, but ends up exhausting it to such an extent that the novel as a medium begins to resemble a container for conveying “Matriarchal” or “Egalitarian” arguments.

After mentioning that several eighteenth-century critics of the novel, concurring with Samuel Johnson in *Rambler 4*, commented on its “ability to take possession of the reader’s mind and imprint ideas and values ‘almost without the interaction of the will’” (65), Bannet quickly sidesteps the tensions with agency that such an insight introduces. A sentence later she chooses instead to emphasize Johnson’s phrasing in *Rambler 121*: “Women novelists now had a theory of language and of reader reception that allowed exemplarity to move into ‘the boundless regions of possibility which fiction claims for her domain.’” How might this contradiction between narrative fiction’s ability to subjugate its reader on one hand, and offer a freeing space for dominion on the other, complicate the political projects of her feminist writers? How does the space of the eighteenth-century novel compare with the space of the eighteenth-century home as a site of female authority? In what ways does fictional narrative—as coercive or seductive as its eighteenth-century critics made it out to be at times—resist or contradict the feminist aims of self-government, and how might the individual novels’ negotiations of their medium accommodate the very permeability between eighteenth-century concepts of the public and the private that Bannet so carefully delineates? Furthermore, what was the relationship between the novels and the conduct books and tracts that many of the authors also wrote? In her noteworthy and valuable study, these questions about fiction would help round out what is already an important and provocative treatment of the politics of domesticity, and the domesticity of

politics, or the reciprocal relationship between two allegedly estranged spheres that formed the very foundation for early feminism.