

# Richard Steele's Female Readers and the Gender Politics of the Public Sphere in *The Spectator*

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## *Introduction*

*The Spectator's* most significant legacy is its profound transformative influence on the emerging English middle classes, especially in shaping women to roles that accorded to the newly cast social milieu at the beginning of the Eighteenth-century. Carefully woven with humour, wit, satire, critique, and reflection, Addison and Steele sought not only to engage with their audience, but to influence them, creating a community of readership bound by each author's vision of a proper, polite and upstanding English society during the final years of Queen Anne's reign. As English society moved to a commercially focused and permeable class system, *The Spectator* developed a significant relationship with the rising English middle class.<sup>1</sup> Terry Eagleton's suggestion that 'the main impulse' of Addison and Steele's work was one of 'class consolidation, a codifying of the norms and regulating of the practices'<sup>2</sup>, points towards Addison and Steele's continuing endeavour to regulate their audience's behaviours and actions, both public and private, and in turn mould the new middle class according to their vision.

A crucial social and cultural paradigm during this period was the rise of, and subsequent distinction between, both the private and public spheres in Eighteenth-century England. As Jurgen Habermas argues in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, *The Spectator* was fundamental to the rise of the English middle class, their morals and behaviours, as well as influencing both the public sphere and the private

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<sup>1</sup> Donald Newman, *The Spectator: Emerging Discourses* (Boston: Rosemont Publishing, 2005), p.16.

<sup>2</sup> Terry Eagleton, *The Function of Criticism: From The Spectator to Post-Structuralism* (London: Verso Publishing, 1984), p.10.

realms.<sup>3</sup> Habermas theorises that the bourgeois public sphere developed out of the preexisting public sphere, which consisted of state apparatuses such as the court, the church, and educational institutions. The new bourgeois public sphere<sup>4</sup> was an arena for private individuals to come together to discuss and critique broader society. The development of the public sphere and widespread social and political debate was born largely from the evolution of the private realm. Habermas argued that Addison and Steele's periodical was crucial to the transformation of the public sphere largely because of the way it held up a 'mirror'<sup>5</sup> to its readership and broader society, allowing them to be critical, informed and self-reflexive.

While Anthony Pollock maintains that Habermas' argument 'remains an unavoidable starting point for studies of early eighteenth-century print culture'<sup>6</sup>, he argues that the model advanced has been criticised for its 'blind spots [...] especially regarding issues of gender.'<sup>7</sup> Although Habermas argues that *The Spectator* greatly influenced the organisation and democratisation of critical thought in the public sphere,<sup>7</sup> the reality for the female reader in the early eighteenth century was rather different. Coupled with widespread thought that inappropriate reading was dangerous for the female mind, women were not nearly as involved in public debates or discussions as men were, especially in the social and cultural microcosm of many of London's coffeehouses. Whilst women were a significant part of *The Spectator's* readership, Erin Mackie has argued that records of 'women in English coffeehouses is scanty and does not include any representation of their participation in the debates there.'<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, Brian Cowan argues that women who did find themselves in the masculine coffeehouse environment were certainly 'not considered to be a legitimate part of it.'<sup>9</sup> The consequence was *The Spectator* usually engaged with its female readers in a more

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<sup>3</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Enquiry Into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, Trans. Thomas Burger (Boston: MIT Press, 1989), p.43.

<sup>4</sup> Henceforth referred to as the public sphere.

<sup>5</sup> Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Enquiry Into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, p. 43.

<sup>6</sup> Anthony Pollock, 'Neutering Addison and Steele: Aesthetic Failure and the Spectatorial Public Sphere,' *English Literary History*, Volume 74, Issue 3, 2007.

<sup>7</sup> Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Enquiry Into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, p.41.

<sup>8</sup> Erin Mackie, *Being Too Positive About the Public Sphere*, In *The Spectator: Emerging Discourses*, p.84.

<sup>9</sup> Brian Cowan, *The Social Life of Coffee: The Emergence of the British Coffeehouse*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), p. 251.

individual, intimate and private setting, than it did its male readers.<sup>10</sup> Female exclusion from various aspects of the public sphere meant that reaching them in their private realms and domestic spaces was vital for Addison and Steele.

The aim of this article is to examine Habermas' neglect of *The Spectator's* female readership through investigating the periodical's positioning of women in the public and private spheres. In doing so, focus will be given to essays written by Richard Steele, rather than those by Addison, as Steele's progressive deliberations make for a more appropriate point of consideration. Whilst *The Spectator* encouraged its female readers to think critically about literature and the arts, the extent to which Steele afforded his female readers agency and autonomy is directly related to, and hence limited by, the very real boundaries of the home and the public sphere. As will be shown, women were permitted to engage in debate with men in the home, yet ultimately forced to be reliant upon and subservient to men in public.

### *The confinement of women in the private sphere*

Any examination of *The Spectator's* construction of feminine place in the public sphere must first be grounded in an understanding of the way the periodical positioned and addressed women in the private sphere. *The Spectator's* instruction on the reading process for women was complex and diverse, extending far beyond simply encouraging women to read the periodical. Addison and Steele often emphasised the importance of engaging with *The Spectator* each day, and even in some instances encouraged dialogue and exchange with men. However, whilst Steele ascribed his female readers a certain level of agency, the periodical's core vision for its female readers was underscored by a desire to ground the female in domesticity. *The Spectator* encouraged attentive, critical, female readers, yet demonstrated an agenda of keeping them confined to the domestic space.

*Spectator* 11 demonstrates how the periodical encouraged and constructed domestic behavioural norms for female readers. In *Spectator* 11, Steele uses modelled behaviour to encourage critical readership practices amongst the journal's female readers, but tethers these practices to the ideal of female domesticity. Steele's essay recounts Mr. Spectator's visit to the

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<sup>10</sup> See *Spectator* 46 (April 23rd, 1711) for an example of the way the periodical models the debates and discussions of its male readers in the coffeehouse setting.

home of a female acquaintance, Arietta. Upon entering her home, Mr. Spectator observes her debate with another male guest on the topic of 'constancy in love' and the vices of men and women alike. The debate establishes the home as a pseudo-coffeehouse environment, legitimising female participation and expression. Most importantly, Steele uses the character of Arietta and her actions in the debate to model an ideal vision of a female reader that is critical, knowledgeable, and autonomous.

Steele's initial characterisation of Arietta at the start of the essay lays the foundation for his use of modelled behaviour throughout. Upon entering her home and seeing her debate with an unknown gentleman across from her, Steele proceeds to illustrate Arietta as a woman in possession of ideal female characteristics. She is 'neither affected with the follies of youth nor the infirmities of age', seemingly at a perfect, undefined median. She is 'agreeable to the young and old', of respectable behaviour and ambition and able to converse intelligently with men. She even resists the urge to interrupt the man she debates with when he demonstrates a profound ignorance of classical literature in order to argue about the general follies of the female sex, 'repeat[ing] and murder[ing] the celebrated story of the *Ephesian Matron*' in an effort to 'distinguish himself before a woman of Arietta's taste and understanding.' The effect of Steele's deliberate juxtaposition of the two characters at the beginning of *The Spectator* essay is twofold. Firstly, it provides the framework that allows Steele to critique male vices, whilst praising ideal female qualities. Secondly, and more importantly, characterising Arietta as a type of female ideal means that what she subsequently says, or how she behaves, is therefore also ideal.

Steele's inclusion of the *Ephesian Matron* is indicative of his belief that an intelligent, virtuous, and accomplished female reader should be well acquainted with both classical and modern literature. Arietta analyses the gentleman's argument based upon her extensive knowledge of classical literature and her understanding becomes crucial to her success in the debate. She is well read and knowledgeable, and embodies a woman who is not only capable of reading, understanding, and critiquing higher literature, but can also use it to successfully debate and defeat the gentleman. It is only through her understanding of the classics, argues Horejsi, that Arietta is able to refute 'the misogyny of the classical tradition and the translation of antifeminist elements into modern contexts.'<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Nicole Horejsi, 'A Counterpart to the Ephesian Matron: Steele's "Inkle and Yarico" and a Feminist Critique of the Classics,' *Eighteenth Century Studies*, Vol. 39, Issue 2, (2006) p. 217.

Arietta does not counter the paradigm supplied via the *Ephesian Matron* with another classical model; rather she interprets it, critiques it, and counters it with a modern narrative from Europe's encounters with the New World—the *Inkle and Yarico* tale. In so doing, Steele, through Arietta, establishes a hierarchy for classical and modern literature and the way each communicates values to modern readers. Classical literature, whilst informative, is philosophical, and by the very nature of its age less applicable to the eighteenth-century woman. Modern, contemporary literature, however, is more practical, and often expands paradigms identifiable in classical literature with tangible examples and scenarios. This is especially the case with the *Inkle and Yarico* narrative, in which the Native American woman is sold into slavery, losing her liberty because of her love. Steele saw an accomplished and critical reader as one who could seamlessly interpret and understand literature, both classical and modern, and Arietta displays this. The combination of Arietta's superior understanding of classical literature, and her subsequent use of *Inkle and Yarico*, personifies Steele's notion of an ideal female reader.

Further, Steele's description of Yarico compliments the modelled behaviour exhibited by Arietta. Katherine Shevelow argues that while a 'noble savage', Yarico 'behaves very much like the virtuous and domestic English middle class wife.'<sup>12</sup> Her primary occupation is that of Inkle's carer and lover; he is her primary concern. Furthermore, her natural goodness and tenderness in the improvised domestic space of the cave is mimetic of the domestic spaces inhabited by the female readers of *The Spectator*. It is through the opposite yet complimentary characters of Arietta and Yarico that Steele constructs an ideal woman that is critically engaged with literature, yet firmly tethered to and concerned with the home environment.

Whilst confined spatially to the domestic, Steele's female reader is intellectually very much equal to or greater than her male counterpart. Mr. Spectator even becomes an unreliable narrator in the conclusion of the essay to demonstrate as such, 'I left the room with tears in my eyes, which a woman of Arietta's good sense I am sure, take for... applause.' Not only does Steele's narrator deliberately project his own emotion onto the reader to convince them of Arietta's success, but his self-assurance that she non-verbally understood his tears as compliment, furthers his construction of an

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<sup>12</sup> Katherine Shevelow, *Women and Print Culture. Construction of Gender in the Early Periodical* (London: Routledge, 1989), p.144.

intelligent, aware, and virtuous female reader. Arietta is able to construct a successful and sophisticated rebuttal to her male counterpart with a firm understanding of modern and classical literature. Intellectually, she is by no means inferior to the male guest; she is limited only by the social convention that dictates she must be grounded in domesticity. It is in this sense the female reader was almost a subset of the male reader. She is equal in intellectual capacity, but ultimately separated by her isolation in the domestic environment.

### *Public Propriety*

Issues of public propriety and civility were central to Addison's and Steele's efforts to construct a virtuous England, and similarly, therefore, lie at the heart of how *The Spectator* constructs notions of female reading and readership. Whilst Steele's writing resonated with women in the private sphere, *The Spectator's* female readers, and women in general in the early eighteenth century, were by no means wholly confined to the home. Consequently, Steele's 'polite' ideology hinged more on the types of public activities, engagements, interactions, and behaviours that connect Englishmen and women than their private affairs. This is because the public arena was where the polite society manifested itself, where its virtues (and vices) were on display. Therefore, Steele must inevitably address issues of public propriety for his female readership.

Whilst *The Spectator* did, at times, address men at home as well as in the public sphere, there was not the same level of diversity for the periodical's female addressees. This phenomenon is evident in several prominent essays from *The Spectator*. For example, once again in *Spectator* 11, Mr. Spectator praises Arietta's aptitude for debate and criticism in developing a model for feminine virtue, the setting is a salon or private party, situated in her own home rather than the masculine coffeehouse environment. Arietta's display of feminine virtue is further reinforced by the subject of the debate in question, that is, constancy in love, in which Arietta convincingly argues that the faithfulness of women is superior to men. Other prominent essays demonstrate this trend as well, for example *Spectator* 92 features a woman named Leonora writing to Addison for advice on what literature she should read. Leonora calls upon her servant for breakfast, only for the servant to reply that 'The Spectator was not yet come in; but that the Tea-Kettle boiled, and she expected it every moment.' The synonymy between breakfasting and reading *The Spectator* demonstrated by Leonora

not only suggests that the periodical (and therefore reading) is as vital to her daily functioning as tea and bread, but more importantly breakfasting at home with *The Spectator* itself re-enforces the boundaries of domesticity upon the female reader.

Both the subject matter, constancy in love, and the fact that a woman is involved in the discussion required Steele to set the debate in the domestic sphere and not the coffeehouse as was the established domain. The practice of debate in Arietta's home mimics that which would have taken place in the coffeehouse, and the act alone transforms the space from private to public, guests such as Mr. Spectator set foot in and out of her home to observe the debate without ever so much as saying a word to Arietta herself. Furthermore, in so doing, Arietta takes on a more dominant and masculine role in the debate. The depiction of the coffeehouse in *Spectator* 46 renders the converse image, where each member of the crowd depicted is male, gendering the coffeehouse—an emblem of the English public sphere—as a predominantly masculine environment.

Steele's *Spectator* 155 explores the effects of constructing the coffeehouse (and by a process of metonymy the broader public sphere) as masculine, serving to illustrate how its exclusionary basis presents complications for Steele's female readers. Mr. Spectator starts this number by explaining how often he overhears inappropriate conversations in public, or an 'indecent license taken in discourse', happening when 'travelling together in the same hired coach, sitting near each other in any publick Assembly, or the like.' Most importantly, he explains how these conversations are often conducted by vain and conceited men (referred to as 'coxcombs') at the expense of any woman nearby, and has been frequented with letters of complaint from his female readers regarding such an issue.

The issue of impropriety in male-female relations becomes the central theme of Steele's essay. To further demonstrate such a calamity of impoliteness, the essay includes a letter from a female proprietor of a coffeehouse whose experience of ownership illuminates the gender complications regarding the public sphere and coffeehouse environment. The woman constantly overhears her male customers describing 'the improper discourses they are pleased to entertain me with', striving to say 'the most immodest things in my hearing' whilst 'at the same time half a dozen of them loll at the bar staring just in my face, ready to interpret my Looks and Gestures according to their own Imaginations.' The confronting nature of the male customers speech and action demonstrates the extent to

which the female in the public sphere was viewed as the other. The way the men ridicule her in her own coffeehouse is indicative of how coffeehouses were constructed as masculine environments. Despite her ownership of the property they exhibit immodest, misogynistic behaviour in an attempt to exert control over the space of the coffeehouse traditionally seen as a man's environment.

Edward Bramah maintains that women were forbidden (albeit not explicitly) from partaking in the masculine coffeehouse culture.<sup>13</sup> Brian Cowan argues that such a phenomena was mainly because the themes of discussion and debate, such as business and politics, were often male centered and therefore female discussion and participation was unnecessary. In particular, Cowan refutes Paula McDowell's assertion that female news hawkers (who would show up in coffeehouses to sell their wares) were powerful agents of political discourse and 'were not merely the producers and distributors of others political ideas.'<sup>14</sup> Cowan asserts that these hawkers 'can hardly be considered full-fledged participants in the masculine public sphere to whose needs they catered' and that 'these poor and illiterate women may have made their way into the coffeehouses, but were not considered to be a legitimate part of it.'<sup>15</sup> The treatment of the female coffeehouse owner at the hands of her male customers presents a unique problem for *The Spectator's* female readership. That is, how can a woman maintain her civility and propriety when surrounded by dominant masculine incivility and exclusion of the female sex in the coffeehouse environment?<sup>16</sup>

In addition to the complexity of being isolated females in a dominantly masculine environment, Cowan highlights how social perceptions of female coffeehouse owners further contributed to the poor treatment and incivility they experienced from their male patrons. Cowan points to female owners of coffee houses as the only tangible example of female presence in the environment. These 'coffee-women' made up approximately twenty percent of coffeehouse owners in 1692.<sup>17</sup> However, they were considered 'suspect figures', and Cowan writes, 'the low social status of the coffee-house keeper

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<sup>13</sup> Edward Bramah, *Tea and Coffee: A Modern View of Three Hundred Years of Tradition* (Essex: Hutchinson & Co, 1972), p. 47.

<sup>14</sup> Paula McDowell, *The Women of Grub Street: Press, Politics, and Gender in the London Literary Marketplace 1678-1730* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998), p. 31.

<sup>15</sup> Cowan, *The Social Life of Coffee: The Emergence of the British Coffeehouse*, p. 251.

<sup>16</sup> This question is addressed in the third section of this article.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* p. 251.

only accentuated the coffee-woman's vulnerability to the solicitations of her customers.'<sup>18</sup> The coffee-woman in Steele's essay is certainly indicative of this historical phenomenon; she is the only woman in a masculine environment, and from the way the male customers stare at her in her own establishment, it is clear she is seen as an exotic entity. The traditionally masculine nature of the coffeehouse renders her as foreign and as the other.

Steele's inclusion of the coffeehouse owner's letter, and his sympathy towards her 'melancholy circumstance' at the hands of the male 'rogues' and 'coxcombs', serves to illustrate the alarming complications women faced due to masculine dominance. Such implications were, however, mostly a result of the behaviour of impolite and improper men in the public space. Steele writes that the coffeehouse owner's dilemma is not unique, having received 'innumerable messages' from his female readers regarding similar issues. Women's treatment by men in public had a unique relationship with the nature of trade and economy at the time. As the public sphere transformed, so too did English commerce. Habermas' examination of emerging debate and criticism is that commerce was linked to England's ability to produce and disperse periodicals such as *The Spectator* at a high rate. There was an inextricable connection between commerce and publicity and print culture and debate.<sup>19</sup> But for women, this time of social and economic transformation created a problematic public sphere mostly ruled and occupied by men. Women in the public sphere were often viewed as goods themselves—commodified by men and male observers. From the news hawkers who catered to the needs of the masculine public sphere, to the female owners of coffeehouses, women in the public sphere were often associated with 'some form of sexual immorality', particularly prostitution.<sup>20</sup> We see this phenomenon discussed by Steele in response to the coffee-shop owner's letter; the woman in Steele's essay is viewed as a sexual object and as something that can be purchased. Steele writes:

They tell me that a young Fop cannot buy a Pair of Gloves, but he is at the same time straining for some Ingenious Ribaldry to say to the young Woman who helps them on. It is no small Addition to the Calamity, that the Rogues buy as hard as the plainest and modestest Customers they have; besides which,

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid. p. 251.

<sup>19</sup> David Zaret, *Origins of Democratic Culture: Printing, Petitions, and the Public Sphere* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 35.

<sup>20</sup> Cowan, *The Social Life of Coffee: The Emergence of the British Coffeehouse*, p. 253.

they loll upon their Counters half an Hour longer than they need,  
to drive away other Customers.

The 'young fop' mentioned by Steele is just as interested in the woman selling him the gloves as the gloves themselves. For the customer, she is seen as indistinguishable from the goods she sells, and so determined were men such as these to acquaint themselves with women shopkeepers that they loitered in the stores to 'drive away other customers.' Women in the public sphere were often seen as 'sexually vulnerable, even available' argues Will Pritchard, and that 'inevitably, women who sold were suspected of being themselves for sale.'<sup>21</sup> Even some time earlier the French philosopher Samuel de Sorbier remarked that there were 'to be had.. fine shop women'<sup>22</sup> in London, implying that women in the public sphere were like consumer goods, to be looked at, inspected, even purchased. The anxieties of female shopkeepers in this regard is confirmed by Steele, when he writes that the 'very excellencies and personal perfections' of women such as her, subject them to be treated by men 'as if they stood there to sell their Persons to Prostitution.' This notion put forth by de Sorbier strengthened perceptions of female coffeehouse owners as prostitutes, if not commodities.

Furthermore, the use of the feminised 'young fop' by Steele reinforces the gendering of public spaces. The fop's focus on fashion and shopping for clothes undermines his masculinity, his partaking in an activity that is usually reserved for women. Certain activities enforce or undermine gender norms and expectations. On the one hand, this man is portrayed as less masculine due to his shopping for clothes (an entirely different and far less masculine economic activity than trade and commerce) and the shop environment was far more intimate and far less public than the coffeehouse or royal exchange (a more common, and masculine scene of business portrayed in *The Spectator* 69). On the other hand, Arietta in *Spectator* 11 is seen as more masculine and dominant because of her partaking in the traditionally masculine pursuit of cultural and political debate and discussion. Further, her home becomes a more public setting, acting as a pseudo coffeehouse, with Mr. Spectator seamlessly entering and exiting.

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<sup>21</sup> Will Pritchard, *Outward Appearances: The Female Exterior in Restoration London* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press), p. 163.

<sup>22</sup> In 'The European Magazine, and London Review' *Philological Society of London*, 1815 Vol. 16 p. 122.

*The Challenges of Improprity and the Desired Feminine Response*

The question at the crux of this cultural issue for Steele's female readers was how to act in response to such implications of masculine impropriety. Steele subsequently uses analogy to define and defend his female readers against such male behaviours. Steele's use of analogy to compare women in the public sphere to prostitutes is termed by Pritchard as 'usefully imperfect.'<sup>23</sup> Pritchard argues that Steele's use of the analogy to draw an absurd comparison to prostitution in effect defends women and sets a precedent for which 'legitimate female economic activity' is established. The effect of Steele's analogy is to legitimise the presence and activity of women in the public sphere and provide a new model for their proper entry into the broader affairs of the public domain. Yet, whilst the shopkeeper is just one type of female reader of *The Spectator*, her letter is representative of *The Spectator's* female readership as a whole. Therefore, it is assumed that other female readers shared the concerns and anxieties presented within her letter, especially when Mr. Spectator writes that he often received correspondence on such a topic. For the female readers that associated with such concerns and anxieties, Steele is encouraging them to partake in the activities in the public sphere, be they coffeehouse owners, shopkeepers, news hawkers, or otherwise. Steele does not provide them with a behavioural taxonomy to do so, but instead chooses to use analogy and absurdity against men who would seek to undermine their activities in public life.

This understanding of the masculine dominance of the public sphere led Steele to target his male readers, and in so doing, create a symbiotic relationship between men and women in the public sphere. Steele constructed men as the regulators; the behaviour and actions of men determined whether such exchanges between the sexes were misogynistic and in poor taste, or are encompassed by what Mee terms 'a polite circuit of trade.'<sup>24</sup> Such was the importance and role of men in empowering female agency that Steele encouraged men to exhibit notions of idealised masculine virtue so as to support and enable women. He states that 'a man of honour and sense' should have in mind the state of women when interacting with them, and therefore be grounded in respect and politeness. That being said, the labeling of women as 'helpless' creates a paradigm of a 'damsel in distress'. Consequently, women are so reliant upon men to regulate their actions with each other, that when the very little agency and freedom they

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<sup>23</sup> Pritchard, *Outward Appearances: The Female Exterior in Restoration London*, p. 164.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* p. 53.

experience in the public sphere is under threat, they must consult another more significant man in Steele for assistance. For *The Spectator's* female readers, the realisation is that all activity in the public sphere—even when legitimate—will be regulated and impacted upon by men both negatively, as demonstrated in the behaviours of the coffeehouse customers, and positively, in models of propriety exemplified by Mr. Spectator, or the 'virtuous' men that Steele deploys.

The female reader here is ultimately left to make her own choices about how she is expected to act in the public sphere when encountering men. She is encouraged to acquaint herself with good men of 'honour and sense'—an impossibility for the shopkeeper who relies on customers, be they polite or not. Alternatively, when a situation arises in which she feels undermined or disrespected by men in the male dominated arena, she cannot speak for herself, but rather seek out a man of 'honour and sense' to rectify the situation on her behalf. In either situation, it can be seen that the female reader is fundamentally dependent upon the assistance of men in the public sphere.

*Spectator* 336 provides an alternative examination of Steele's efforts to mould his female readers actions in the public sphere. Steele employs a direct reader to author discourse, which exemplifies a modelled, implied, and ideal form of relationship between author and reader. This discourse promotes a broad vision of ideal readership that has an intimate reliance on *The Spectator*, similar to Addison's correspondent Leonora, and her connection to the periodical as a 'fair disciple' in *Spectator* 92. In *Spectator* 92 Addison quotes Leonora's letter, but also provides his own argument. Steele refrains from the same discourse in *Spectator* 336, constructing his argument solely via the letter of one 'Rebecca the distress'd'. Whilst the essay starts on an unrelated issue of young men respecting their elders, with an epigraph quoting Horace on the matter as well as a male reader's letter, it is Rebecca who presents an argument against vanity and superficiality. Rebecca's argument is that the women who frequent her china shop have no interest in purchasing any of her goods, but do so only to construct an air of superiority and sophistication for themselves.

Steele's reliance on Rebecca's words rather than his own amplifies the effect created by Addison's action in *Spectator* 92. Through the absence of his own writing or other related material, be they other letters or classical quotes, Steele employs the woman's voice to impart information directly to the reader. The fundamental reliance on Rebecca's letter means that Steele's

reader has no indication of what argument will be presented within, but more importantly, the reader becomes ultimately dependent upon her letter for meaning and understanding. As Katherine Shevelow argues, the use of, and reliance upon, Rebecca's letter highlights how Steele uses it to serve an 'illustrative and regulatory function' becoming an 'additional moral voice'<sup>25</sup> in the argument.

Steele's reliance on the letter ultimately creates a framework for his readers to examine and imitate the behaviour exhibited by Rebecca within it. Rebecca becomes an additional didactic voice, the underlying implication being that by including her letter, Steele is providing an illustration of how he expects his female audience to operate in the public sphere. The inclusion of her letter without any additional discourse is suggestive of Steele's tacit approval of her behaviour. However, Steele's approval is not just of how Rebecca operates in relation to *The Spectator*, but more importantly, how she carries herself in public and transmits the ideals and values within the periodical into public life. Demonstrating her behaviour without additional paratext is Steele's approbation and appreciation of what she does, it takes precedent in that issue's argumentative hierarchy. Furthermore, it is Steele's way of implicitly declaring he expects other readers to do so as well.

The idealised reader/author of *Spectator* 336 exhibits ideal types of public behaviour, and in so doing lays a foundation for an exemplary model for other female readers. Besides 'waiting patiently' for Mr. Spectator's papers, a virtue she has in common with Leonora in *Spectator* 92, this Rebecca is a china merchant, who receives 'as fine Company as any o' this end of the Town.' Rebecca certainly seems a devoted, upstanding reader of *The Spectator*, and a woman of fine taste. Yet it is Rebecca's actions in treating the female rakes that elevates her character and serves as a model for Steele's female readers. She is patient with her frustrating customers and adopts an attitude of servitude and restraint, the latter of which is particularly important. Rebecca's patience and politeness are ideal virtues for conduct in this social situation, evidenced by Lawrence Klein's argument that politeness in early eighteenth-century England served as a 'normative framework for human relations, since its conventions relied on freedom, equality, activity and restraint.'<sup>26</sup> Restraint, alongside respecting the freedom

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<sup>25</sup> Shevelow, *Women and Print Culture. Construction of Gender in the Early Periodical*, p. 114.

<sup>26</sup> Lawrence Klein, 'Enlightenment as Conversation,' in *What's Left of Enlightenment?: A Postmodern Question*, ed. Keith Michael Baker and Peter Hanns Reill (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2001), p. 158.

and (albeit intolerable) activities of the rakish women is how Rebecca's politeness is manifested. Furthermore, despite 'not being a shilling better for it', this female shopkeeper does not compromise her integrity in order to make a sale by cheapening her tea.

Crucially, Rebecca is of a notably higher class than the female coffeehouse owner in *Spectator* 92, and this distinction in class serves to highlight the diversity of *The Spectator's* female readership.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, it means that the construction of an ideal female reader was not dependent upon class, creed, or socioeconomic distinctions, but instead deals with unifying characteristics such as politeness, patience, and propriety that transcends social and class boundaries. Just as inside the masculine coffeehouse male customers were 'Like Noah's ark, every kind of creature, in every walk of life...town wit, grave citizen, a worthy lawyer...voluble sailor',<sup>28</sup> so too did *The Spectator* transcend social and class boundaries to unite its female readers in a common quest for civility.

As a 'Spectator' herself, Rebecca's gaze upon customers reveals their vanity, rakish qualities, and the ridiculousness of their going about town to keep up appearances, but the reader's gaze upon Rebecca demonstrates the constitution of her own character. Patient, humble, aware of her domestic duties, uncompromising in her ideals and virtues, a woman in public should never seek out attention, but be guided by said virtues. Her role as a 'Spectator' also brings her into alignment with the other members of 'The Spectator Club', such as Mr. Spectator, and his friend Will Honeycomb. Furthermore, such an alignment affects the gendered nature of her presentation because it applies a type of masculine power and privilege to her as a 'Spectator' that the public sphere would prohibit, but with which Steele empowers her.

Lawrence Klein highlights how this particular importance on politeness in the face of social faux pas was an integral part of both *The Spectator's* didacticism and eighteenth century England in general, arguing that, 'politeness was sometimes viewed as the necessary means for bringing out

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<sup>27</sup> Coffeehouse owners were of lower social status than not only other women of trade such as china merchants like Rebecca, but often their male patrons who extended inappropriate solicitations. See Cowan, Brian, *The Social Life of Coffee: The Emergence of the British Coffeehouse* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), p. 251.

<sup>28</sup> Aytoun Ellis, *The Penny Universities: A History of the Coffee-houses* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1956), p. 46.

the best in oneself and in others. By being agreeable, it was said, social actors establish a trust that allows them then to tell the truth, to criticise, and to urge reforms on others without offending them.<sup>29</sup> Rebecca, as both a 'Spectator' and social actor, is able to tolerate these women through politeness, but more importantly, is able to initiate a discourse with *The Spectator* in her attempt to facilitate the paper's project to reform inappropriate behaviour. As a model, her actions create crucial implications of this issue for Steele's female readers in public life. The female reader of *The Spectator* is to be defined in accordance to Rebecca, to use such a definition of her own character to attempt to reform those around themselves as an agent of change for the periodical. The female reader must maintain order and politeness in the face of impoliteness and disorder in the public sphere.

*Spectator* 336 demonstrates that Steele's method for developing the parameters of his ideal female reader lies in his characterisation of stereotypical models of womanhood. The women rummaging through the store are destructive to polite society. Termed 'Day-Goblins' by Rebecca, they strongly resemble the eponymous supernatural creatures in their behaviour. David Morrill has explored cultural perceptions of faeries and goblins in the eighteenth century, and makes the case that goblins were often seen as vampiric rather than faerie-like.<sup>30</sup> The women leech off the virtue and politeness of Rebecca to sustain their self-aggrandisement, threatening the sanctity of Steele's polite society in the same way they upturn the sanctity of Rebecca's china shop. The dehumanisation of these women through the term 'goblins' creates a potent nomenclature for the implied female readers to define themselves in opposition to. Furthermore, as a symbol of order, politeness, and Englishness, the china shop represents a range of virtues that Addison and Steele value in polite society. By illuminating improper behaviour, Rebecca is characterised in juxtaposition to the group of 'female rakes' who frequent her shop. She is presented as a laudable model for public propriety, displaying the essential virtues extolled by Addison and Steele. In this sense, Rebecca and her china shop serves as a broader societal microcosm for polite society. The store is an ordered and structured environment, which, through Rebecca's ownership and maintenance, is defined by politeness, patience and humility.

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<sup>29</sup> Lawrence Klein, 'Politeness and the Interpretation of the British Eighteenth Century,' *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 5, Issue 4, 2002, p. 857.

<sup>30</sup> Morrill, David S. (Spring 1990), 'Twilight is not good for maidens': Uncle Polidori and the Psychodynamics of Vampirism in Goblin Market,' *Victorian Poetry* 28:1, pp1-2.

However, the way in which *The Spectator* encouraged its female readers to personify *The Spectator's* polite society varies with regard to whether she is interacting with men or women. *Spectator* 336 seeks to make its female readers agents of politeness and propriety in the public sphere. The shop serves as a microcosm for broader English society, and Steele uses the shop owner Rebecca as an example of modelled behaviour for his readers, but also characterises ideal behavioural traits in juxtaposition to the actions of the female rakes that visit the store. Rebecca serves as a lamp on a hill, a beacon of civility in the shop, in which by exhibiting ideal characteristics that personify *The Spectator's* polite society she becomes an agent for it.

### Conclusion

*The Spectator's* implied female reader is defined by politeness, civility and even submissiveness in the public sphere. The only instance in which she is afforded a significant sense of agency and power is when she interacts with other women. In that scenario, the female reader (like Rebecca the china shop owner) is encouraged to act as an agent of change and politeness amongst peers of her gender. Amongst men, however, it is assumed that such women cannot stand up to and defend themselves against the misogyny of the public sphere. As a result, women such as the coffeehouse owner, must use men of 'honour and sense' to act as intermediary for her.

For *The Spectator's* female readers the realisation is that their activity in the public sphere, whilst certainly legitimate, was one that would always be regulated and impacted upon by men both negatively (coffeehouse customers) and positively (Steele). The subsequent ramification is that male dominance in public and coffeehouse culture meant that women would inevitably have to encounter and interact with men. Upon interacting with men, the female's power and agency is subsequently shifted to the male subject, men whom, according to Steele, belong to one of two groups. The first group are men who use the transfer of power to suppress women. Yet, the second group are men of 'honour and sense'. It is the group of men with 'honour and sense' that Steele's female readers are encouraged to associate with, authorising them to be their proxies against undesirable and improper men who would seek to suppress them. Such was the nature of the woman's position in English society at the time; her very freedom of movement and economic activity in a male dominated public sphere was one that *The Spectator* defined as being inevitably dependent upon men.

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