Blue Stocking Women in the Eighteenth Century British Public Sphere
Motivations of Lord Macartney Prior to the Embassy
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Abstract: According to James Hevia in his 1996 book Cherishing Men from Afar, Lord Macartney’s outlook during the Embassy to China in 1793 was primarily motivated by his membership in the Literary Club. The Literary Club was founded by Sir Joshua Reynolds and Dr. Samuel Johnson in 1764. Hevia argued that the Club, as it was known by its members, was “an expression of the public-sphere culture.” This paper argues that Macartney’s influence, prior to the Embassy’s departure from England in 1792, had nothing to do with the Club. Instead, a more nuanced “rational exchange” occurred external to the Club. Evidence suggests that Macartney, along with Johnson and other Club members, interacted with women of the Blue Stockings. Blue Stockings were an example of Eighteenth Century bourgeois society women in England. Correspondence and memoirs placed Macartney with Johnson and the Blue Stockings during the period of 1779 to 1780. Women of the Blue Stockings (along with one outsider, Elizabeth Craven) acted with intent in manipulating the salon environment of London in order to facilitate a moral conversation for themselves and Johnson. Morality was explicitly mandated by essays written by Blue Stockings for Johnson’s Rambler in 1750. Macartney’s outlook during the Embassy can then be viewed as moral in character.

Introduction

James Hevia, in his rereading of previous historiography that viewed late Imperial China’s tributary system as a reason for Lord George Macartney’s failure in 1794 to open trade with Britain, argued that the Eighteenth Century public sphere in London was the intellectual stimulus behind Macartney’s embassy.¹ Hevia posited the Literary Club, founded in 1764 by preeminent moral essayist Dr. Samuel Johnson and painter Sir Joshua Reynolds, as the locus of Macartney’s motivation, as he would become a member in 1786.² But what Hevia did not consider was the preponderance of intellectual and moral agency within a group of highly educated, bourgeois English women, self-identified as Blue Stockings, who hosted social gatherings in which Macartney participated along with Johnson prior to his membership in the Club.

² Ibid. 64. The founding members would later refer the Literary Club simply as the Club.
European merchants since the Seventeenth Century were restricted to the southern coast of China in Canton and trade within the interior was forbidden. By the last two decades of the 1700s, the British Empire sought to break out from the prohibitive constraints of the Canton System and expand trade to the northern part of China. The Macartney Embassy (1792-1794) was Britain’s first diplomatic contact with Imperial China. The Embassy, as part of its main mission, pursued extension of trade to China’s eastern coastal ports, subsequently allowing more exports from the British Isles. Lord Macartney took presents that he hoped would impress upon the Qing emperor the culmination of enlightened ideals of science, art, and commerce. To ensure no damage to the more intricate gifts, Macartney negotiated with the two Chinese ministers assigned to the Embassy. He succeeded in keeping the gifts at Peking instead of them continuing on to the emperor’s summer residence located north of the imperial capital.

Macartney’s decisions about the gifts were made after the Embassy’s five week trip up the eastern coast from Macao, prior to his audience with the Qianlong emperor on September 14, 1793. Macartney, responding on 31 July to a request for a list of the presents from the Chinese ministers, stated that “[h]is Britannic Majesty has been therefore careful to select only such articles as may denote the progress of science and of the arts in Europe and which may convey some kind of information [that] may be practically useful.” Macartney’s reply suggests that the gifts encapsulated, at least for Macartney, a practical meaning reasonably recognizable to the emperor.

This article will investigate the origins of meaning or symbolism that Macartney imbued upon the gifts prior to the embassy’s departure in 1792. By placing Macartney within the temporal and spatial context of mid-Eighteenth Century Britain, the intent is to shed surprising new light on both his intellectual and ethical motivations. The following discussion will suggest that by the 1750s British bourgeois women, because of their education and place in society, were proactively involved in social circles that encouraged reciprocal intellectual and moral discourses amongst both women and men, and the ideas they formed directly influenced how Macartney viewed and presented the gifts.

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4 Ibid. 75, 79-80. In addition to keeping the gifts at Peking, Macartney further attempted to manipulate the opinion of the Qing court and adjusted the ceremonial bowing (the kowtow). Macartney bowed to one knee instead of completely prostrating and touching his forehead to the ground three times: Ibid, 100.
5 Canton and Macao were in the area of present day Hong Kong. The Embassy departed Macao on June 23 and laid anchor on July 28 in present day Bohai Bay. Lord Macartney and J. L. Cranmer-Byng, An embassy to China: being the journal kept by Lord Macartney during his embassy to the Emperor Ch’ien-lung 1793-1794 (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1963). 69-70.
emperor’s gifts during the conduct of the Embassy. The context in which women directly manipulated the physical space of the salon, and which Macartney shared his gifts, is contrasted by James Hevia’s male-dominant narrative of the British public sphere in *Cherishing Men from Afar*.

James Hevia argued that, according to Confucian tradition and entrenched guest ritual rites within late Eighteenth Century Qing court, the Chinese emperor “cherished men from afar.” Hevia provided a clear interpretation of Chinese motivations that placed constraints upon Lord Macartney’s Embassy. Hevia’s purpose was to step away from the traditional depiction of the Macartney Embassy as a “collision of cultures,” in which the West clashed with the ancient Chinese tributary system. Instead, he viewed both the Macartney Embassy and the Qing court’s actions, within the guest ritual, as “cultural productions.” Simultaneous but incongruent visual and textual representations of global power took place.

Hevia made a theoretically astute argument that Macartney’s negotiation of the presents was transference of the British bourgeois public sphere. Hevia relied on the model provided by Jürgen Habermas of the public sphere consisting of novel social institutions (i.e. salons and men’s clubs) which influenced public opinion. In the case of Eighteenth Century Britain, bourgeois society was formed mainly by landed gentry linked socially and politically to the aristocracy. Hevia further argued that Macartney extended the public sphere to China as a means to communicate ideas of commerce and diplomacy. The extension was based on the notion that negotiation, through which rational exchange produced ‘reciprocal advantages,’ mutually benefited both parties. Hevia cited the Literary Club (henceforth referred to as the Club) as the point-of-origin for this notion. However, his assertion of the Club as an example of British public

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8 Ibid, 25. Hevia’s use of the term “collision of cultures” perhaps alludes critically to Alain Peyrefitte’s book *The Collision of Two Civilisations*. Peyrefitte’s work was originally published in French under the title *L’Empire Immobile* in 1989. Peyrefitte was criticized by most post-colonial historians for placing too much of the blame on the Chinese for the Embassy’s failure to provide equitable concessions to English merchants in Canton and open trade further in the north.

9 Ibid, 59.

10 Ibid, 25. Hevia’s post-modern theoretical framework will not be elaborated here. Suffice to say though that Hevia’s own discussion argued that “contact between two expansive colonial empires” involved “principles of organization as discourses of power, each produced by a ruling bloc for the maintenance of its position and the reconfiguring of its social world.”

11 Hevia, cherishing men from afar. 62-63.

12 Ibid, 62.

13 Ibid, 62.

14 Ibid, 64.
sphere, at least for Macartney, falls short. This shortfall is based on two reasons. First, Hevia attributed Macartney’s influence to the Club’s founding member, Dr. Samuel Johnson. But Johnson died in 1784 and Macartney was not a member of the Club until 1786. Secondly, Hevia disregarded any possibility of influence on Macartney external to the Club.

James Hevia’s Cherishing Men from Afar provided adequate interpretation for other historians in regards to China and its relation with the West. Though Hevia’s outlook on Britain is underwhelming and his connection of the Literary Club as an example of the public sphere unassured, his thesis is still relevant today. Theoretically, the Habermasian model of the bourgeois public sphere in Britain is still supported here. Hevia constituted his theoretical backbone for his argument by stating that “one of the major strengths of [Habermas] is to draw attention to the specificities of history.” The reader should view this essay as providing more detail of historical events in Eighteenth Century England and, in so doing, view it also as an expansion on Hevia’s outlook of the public sphere (henceforth referred to as the Hevia-Habermas model).

This discussion will show that the British public sphere’s influence on Macartney had very little to do with the Club. Instead, the bourgeois public sphere in England was much more nuanced. The ladies of the Blue Stockings were active moral agents alongside Johnson and Macartney. This moral agency was connected to the view that card-playing within social circles was immoral in that it inhibited conversations, particularly with Johnson. The period this group was together was from the time Lord Macartney was returned by France to England in September 1779, after his capture in Grenada earlier in July, and until approximately September 1780 when he became an M.P.

Evidence will illustrate that women were a more dynamic example of rational exchanges, and that their interactions with men like Johnson and Macartney did produce reciprocal advantages. Key evidence will show that Blue Stocking women collaborated with Johnson by writing articles for his Rambler. Some of these essays were about the morality of card playing. This periodical was a collection of essays on morals published between 1750 and 1752. The Rambler essays, along with other published works by Johnson, were found in Macartney’s library in 1786. If Johnson, as we will see a bit later, referred to Macartney as a literary man then it stands to reason

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15 Hevia refers to Johnson’s problematic oriental perspective: Ibid, 85, 106-107. The founding members of the Literary Club referred to it simply as the Club.
16 Ibid, 63 fn10.
17 Macartney was governor of Grenada from 1776 and until his capture by Admiral D’Estaing on July 3, 1779. Macartney was taken back to France as a prisoner-of-war, whereupon he was subsequently paroled and returned to England by the fall. Macartney’s time as a Member of Parliament was short-lived as he was selected to be governor of Madras in India (1781-1786).
that, within a focused epistemological link, Macartney may have garnered some moral truth from the essays.\textsuperscript{19} Macartney’s own personal library, inventoried in 1786, had editions of \textit{The Rambler} and other works by Johnson.\textsuperscript{20}

Letters written during 1779 and 1780 connect Blue Stocking women with both Macartney and Johnson. Letters between Johnson and Blue Stocking member, Mrs. Hester Thrale, mentioned social gatherings at the London residences of Mrs. Elizabeth Vesey, another Blue Stocking, and Lady Elizabeth Craven, who was shunned by the Blue Stockings due to her divorce and remarriage.\textsuperscript{21} Memoirs, not only from these women but also men who took part in social events, will corroborate statements made in the letters. A few Eighteenth Century newspaper articles will provide testament to the origins of the Blue Stockings and literary context to Johnson’s \textit{Rambler}. Before getting to a discussion on when Macartney met Johnson and other members of the Club, first let us unpack statements made by Hevia about what the Literary Club was.

\textbf{– What was the Literary Club? –}

Hevia’s description of the Club came from his supporting secondary source, \textit{Esto Perpetua} (translated “let it be perpetual”). Within this text, club members were portrayed as prominent English gentlemen consolidated into a group defined as the “intellectual aristocracy.” Hevia listed them in the following masculinized way:

“The Club was founded in 1764 by the noted portraitist Sir Joshua Reynolds, court painter to George III and first president of the Royal Academy. Its original membership included Samuel Johnson, who, among his many other talents, was the guiding intellectual force behind... The Gentleman's Magazine; political philosopher Edmund Burke; and bibliophile Topham Beauclerk. By the time of Macartney’s election, the club membership had grown to include orientalist Sir William Jones, naturalist and president of the Royal Society Sir Joseph Banks, actor David Garrick, historian Edward Gibbon, political economist Adam Smith, politician Charles Fox, [and] James Boswell...”

The Club facilitated “manly conversation” based on the Enlightenment ideal of reason and seeking truth by means of the exchange of ideas. According to Hevia, "these principles of truth production also helped to explain Macartney’s election to the Club” because other members lacked the experience of a “seasoned diplomat.” For Hevia, this list provided a concise identification of the Club as “spatially gendered” within his public

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sphere model. Ironically, Hevia’s readily available listing of the members of the Club as an “intellectual aristocracy” was similar to the narrative of the secondary source he used.

Hevia utilized one published work to connect the members of the Club to Macartney. Esto Perpetua, published as two combined short essays written by L.P. Curtis and Herman Liebert in 1962, provided a similar list of the members of the Club. In his essay entitled “Intellectual Aristocracy in Eighteenth-Century England,” Curtis stated that actually “there [was] no need here to recall that The Club was founded by Sir Joshua in 1764.” Curtis continued anyways:

“Who more eminent in lexicography, literary criticism and good talk than Johnson, or in historical writing than Gibbon, in painting than Reynolds, in poetry than Goldsmith, in the writing of comedies than Sheridan, in political economy than Adam Smith, in acting than [David] Garrick, in parliamentary debate than... Charles Fox, in political philosophy than Burke, and in biography than Boswell?”

Liebert continued in a similar list in the subsequent essay, Johnson’s Club, stating how “the Club, is, I think, the most extraordinary phenomenon among all the clubs that have ever been” and that “[i]t began with eight members.” Curtis would provide a bibliography for his essay; whereas, Liebert simply stated that his anecdotes on the members of the Club were already presented by Mr. Curtis. Curtis and Liebert’s colorful details for the Club were, in most respects, anecdotal. The purpose of the essays was not driven towards any critical analysis within historical research. Rather, Esto Perpetua was merely the publishing of two talks given by Curtis and Liebert in 1959 at the Grolier Club in NYC. An exhibition had taken place celebrating the 250th anniversary of Johnson’s birth. The exhibition consisted of rare books and manuscripts related to members of the Club. Most of the collection came from the Beinecke Collection at Yale, where Liebert was its archivist and Curtis taught history.

The all-male anecdotal descriptions of the Club, epitomized as the intellectual aristocracy, can be historically linked to sources published in the first half of the Twentieth Century. Annals of the Club (1914) and Anecdotes of the Literary Club (1948) detailed past members of the Club. The origins of these published works adhered to the Club’s motto, Esto Perpetua, as their purpose was geared towards maintaining continuity in its membership and, of course, conversation. Annals was published by members that constituted the Club just prior to World War 1. Anecdotes was an expansion of C.A. Miller’s 1947 talk that he conducted in front of the Boswell Club in Chicago. In both cases, the root of these sources was directed towards continued membership of men and legitimizing that exclusivity with the original nine members of the Club in 1764.

The initial crux of this legitimacy was the late Eighteenth Century biographical behemoth that was James Boswell’s Life of Samuel Johnson. Published originally in
1791, Boswell’s work would elevate Johnson to legendary status by meticulously recollecting other member's anecdotes and euphemisms about Johnson. Life was not necessarily an accurate account of Johnson as it was more about his character. Johnson left an important legacy in Eighteenth Century English literature as seen by the enormous published works such as A Dictionary of the English Language (1755), Rasselas (1759), and the aforementioned Gentleman's Magazine (1737).

On the other hand, Boswell embellished Johnson's legacy in order to support the encompassing contemporary narrative of bourgeois society in England; a consistent ideological perspective that subordinated any contribution of women at that time. The near symbiotic relationship between the Blue Stockings and Johnson, as seen in essays submitted to The Rambler by two members, contradicts this narrative. An intellectual reciprocity took place between the founders of the Blue Stockings and Johnson. Hester Mulso Chapone, along with Johnson, co-wrote a critique about how card-playing during social events diminished quality conversation. For Chapone and other women, such as founding member Elizabeth Montagu, the essay became a call-for-action in taking direct steps to stop card-playing. Hence, the start of the Blue Stockings was derived from this concern. For Johnson, the concern was more in line with the moral sentiment which his Rambler propagated. Also, the corrective actions by the Blue Stockings at social events through 1780 provided a platform for Johnson to speak on morality.

— The Rambler and Origin of the Blue Stockings —

Mrs. Chapone co-wrote Essay No. 10 with Johnson for the September 21, 1750 edition of The Rambler. The 1750s would be the most prolific for Johnson and his writings on morality. The Rambler, the first of a series of periodical essays, would run until 1752. Johnson would publish two other periodical essays, the Adventurer (1753-54) and the Idler (1758-60). He also, as previously mentioned, published his Dictionary and Rasselas. Because Johnson was spending most of his time on researching for the Dictionary, the moral essays were composed within a short amount of time. This hastiness, according to Walter Jackson Bate, transcended both the genre of periodical essays and moral philosophy. Bate described Johnson's prose as more attuned to classic moral scribes and not of daily vernacular. This direction in narrative style in The Rambler kept Johnson's satirical tendencies at bay.

Chapone took up matters of matrimonial conduct with her Letters on Filial Obedience (1750-51) and A Matrimonial Creed (1751). Her writings at this time represented the attitude of English “upper and middling classes [who] began to see marriage as a matter of emotion as well as duty and socioeconomic necessity.” Chapone may be considered the “female intellectual moralist” of the Eighteenth Century, whose writing argued for freedom to choose whom to marry “while advertising her ‘modesty’ and ‘innocent affections.’” This early modern feminist mindset is what drew her to Johnson and The Rambler.
Johnson would acknowledge, in a rather braggadocious manner, a “number of correspondents which [i]increases every day upon me, shews that my paper is at least distinguished from the common productions of the press.” He completed his remarks with an introduction to Chapone: “I shall now publish some letters... from ladies, whom I sincerely believe as young, as rich, as gay, as fashionable, and as often toasted and treated as herself.” Though his remarks immediately preceded Chapone’s, Johnson’s words reflected the ethical relevance to which he allowed others to contribute to his moral periodical. Fellow Blue Stockings member Elizabeth Carter wrote two essays (No. 44 and No. 100) for The Rambler. In Essay No. 44, Carter continued the rational exchange of ideas, emulating the Hevia-Habermas model, by writing about society as the true sphere of human virtue.

As a prelude to the founding of the Blue Stockings, Carter defended social conversation as a prudent means to overcome the stigma that any pursuit of leisure was immoral. In other words there was the “Superstition” that, though not exactly her words, misery loves company. Carter responded in her essay as recalling a dream where an evil specter attempted to deceive her, saying: “Methought[sic] I was in the midst of a very entertaining set of company, and extremely delighted in attending to a lively conversation.” She was interrupted by the “night-raven” and eventually led away. The evil being then told her,

“O rash unthinking mortal... learn that pleasure was not designed the portion of human life. Man was born to mourn and to be wretched: this is the condition of all below the stars... Fly then from the fatal enchantments of youth and social delight... Misery is the duty of all sublunary beings. and every enjoyment is an offence to the deity, who is to be worshipped only by the mortification of every sense of pleasure...”

At the last moment, an angelic being swooped in saving Carter from her own languishing. The being told her that she had been deceived and that instead “the true enjoyments of a reasonable being... do not consist in the unbounded indulgence.” Man must exercise diligently his superior powers, express “good-will to his fellow creatures,” and “invigorate his nobler pursuits.” Chapone’s statements continued to defend the moral philosophy of Carter and subsequently the main purpose of the Blue Stockings.

Immediately after Johnson’s opening statement in No. 10, Chapone complimented Johnson and his readers of The Rambler by acknowledging the merit of a work “that may be of some publick benefit.” Chapone requested the attention of the readers to her concerns about their own (and by default, Johnson’s) social and moral well-being. Chapone, under the guise of “Lady Racket,” extended an invitation that “she shall have cards at her house, every Sunday, the remainder of the season” in order to light “the torch of truth produced” by a social gathering.

Johnson was appreciative of the invitation and respected the analogy Chapone placed the request within the “torch of truth.” But Johnson placed his dislike of cards as
more a moral constraint than his lack of skills in card playing. For Johnson, his participation at residences where card playing took place was a “visit lost.” Card playing created an environment of anonymity and “solicitude.” Within more ethical concerns for Johnson though, “… cards have changed before it into a thousand spectres of sickness, misery, and vexation.”

*The Rambler*, considering their overall readership, advised Chapone to be more practical in her approach and “shun such dangerous experiments [and] satisfy herself with common appearances.” From this statement the call out was made to begin taking deliberate steps to improve conversation as a moral medium. Ethel Wheeler stated quite succinctly, in *Famous Blue-stockings* (1910), that Dr. Johnson and Mrs. Chapone “helped to form public opinion,” which the ladies of the Blue Stockings reacted through “passive resistance” and refused to allow card-playing at social gatherings. Wheeler placed social contestations within the Hevia-Habermas model; rational exchange produced reciprocal advantage.

— The Blue Stockings —

To reiterate, the details from letters from and about the Blue Stockings are included to shine light on the potential of British women as moral agents actively engaged in facilitating and manipulating the space of conversation for Johnson. In turn, that agency influenced Macartney’s view of the Chinese emperor’s gift embodying that moral agency. The correspondence below shows that the Blue Stockings actively engaged in molding the physical space in order to create an informal, interactive environment. A positive manipulation honed a more efficient, moral exchange much akin to Hevia’s term of cultural production. Additionally, Johnson’s letters placed Macartney within the conversation.

The Worcester Journal, in a column published on January 21, 1808, inquisitively referred to the origins of the Blue Stockings. The newspaper derived the information from the recently published *Memoirs of Mrs. Carter*:

Mrs. Montagu used to have parties of literary persons at her house... [T]o these parties it was not difficult for any person of character to be introduced. There was no ceremony, no cards, and no supper. Even dress was so little regarded that a foreign gentleman... was told in jest that... he might appear there, if he pleased, in blue stockings. This he understood in the literal sense; and when he spoke of it in French, called it the *Bas Blue [blue stocking] Meeting*.22

The Blue Stockings were an informal group of well-educated bourgeois English women who, by the mid-Eighteenth Century, took specific steps to improve conversation during social events. According to a letter written by Sarah Scott in 1750, English bourgeois social affairs were becoming very dull due to card playing inhibiting

conversation: “I excuse myself from card-parties by saying I have a great dislike to sitting by a card-table, which no one can pretend is unreasonable.”23 Her next statement hints to the degree of agency that Eighteenth Century bourgeois women had within the public sphere. She stated that she “found nothing is so useful as asserting one's liberty in these ceremonious points.”24

Even more telling than the speculation of the Blue Stocking’s origins, was how the Blue Stocking women negotiated propriety, i.e. notions of formality/informality, public/private space. General agreement points to Elizabeth Montagu as a primary founder. Mrs. Montagu was most prominent as she started in 1750 hosting breakfasts which, by 1757, had evolved to evening events.25 Montagu laid claim to the term Blue Stocking. Montagu commented, in a letter dated March 1757, on how a frequent guest, Mr. Stillingfleet, was “so much a man of pleasure, he has left off his old friends and his blue stockings [emphasis added].”26 Montagu was inferring to the flighty but personable nature of Benjamin Stillingfleet's social life where one moment he attended an informal gathering wearing his blue stockings and, on other nights, removed them to attend more formal events such as “operas and other gay assemblies.”27 Stillingfleet also attended gatherings hosted by Elizabeth Vesey. Several notable women were known for the establishment of the group, knew each other fondly, and equally participated with each other’s social events. The discussion here though will focus on Elizabeth Vesey and Hester Thrale. The reason for focusing on Vesey and Thrale is twofold: 1) Johnson corresponded with Thrale and partook in Vesey's social gatherings where Macartney was invited also; and 2) Vesey took specific steps in manipulating the physical space to enhance conversation.

Thrale befriended Montagu and Vesey, and was a longtime friend of Samuel Johnson. Johnson wrote to Thrale on Thursday, November 11, 1779. In that letter he remembered his dinner engagement at Agmondesham Vesey’s home.28 Johnson referred to Macartney: “Yesterday I dined at Mr. Vesey’s... In the evening there was Lord Macartney who has been taken by D’Estaing in America, and stripped by him almost naked... He is here now upon parole. He seems in some degree a literary Man.”29

Macartney had been, since 1776, governor-general of Grenada. In July 1779, a French fleet commanded by Admiral D'Estaing attacked and captured Macartney as a prisoner-of-war. News of Macartney’s capture and release reached Britain by the time Johnson

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24 Ibid, 267.
25 Ibid, 270.
26 Doran, a lady of the last century, 270.
27 Ibid, 270.
28 Mrs. Vesey's husband, Agmonsham, was also a member of the Club.
wrote the letter.\textsuperscript{30} To add further evidence that he was familiar with Macartney, Johnson may have previously read Macartney's \textit{A Political Account of Ireland} (1773).\textsuperscript{31}

Johnson's mentioning of Macartney's literary prowess is important to point out here. Not only did the gentlemen socialize inside the physical space changed by Mrs. Vesey, textual narratives also were an important trait occurring simultaneously with verbal narratives. Though Habermas had described bourgeois society as the "men of letters," there is clear evidence here, as the letter above showed, that both men and women were persons of letters. Private letters were also published. A considerable amount of correspondence occurred between Thrale and Johnson for a number of years. Thrale herself would publish memoirs of Johnson after his death in 1784.\textsuperscript{32} Though Vesey did not publish, her impact was felt more within the manner in which she hosted social events.\textsuperscript{33} A discussion of Mrs. Vesey's influence is where we turn now.

\textbf{Mrs. Vesey's Approach as Blue Stocking—}

A letter written by Bennet Langton to James Boswell in May 1780 described a social gathering hosted by Mrs. Vesey where Johnson, Macartney, and other distinguished women participated. Langton described how the group had gathered around Johnson when he spoke. After identifying, in very respectable terms, the ladies and gentlemen in attendance (including Club founder Reynolds), Langton stated that \"[a\]s soon as Dr. Johnson was come in and had taken a Chair, the Company began to collect round him till they became not less than four; if not five deep; those behind standing, and listening over the heads of those that were sitting near him.\"\textsuperscript{34} Langton, a fellow Club member, wrote this letter to Boswell as a testimonial to Johnson's character: \"You would have been highly entertained as it exhibited an Instance of the high importance in which Dr. Johnson's Character is held.\"\textsuperscript{35} Though Langton's prose is focused solely on Johnson, Mrs. Vesey's contribution can still be gleaned from the text. The clue of Vesey's input was seen in how Langton described the manner of talk that the group was in. The conversation \"was chiefly between Dr. Johnson and the Provost of Eaton while the others contributed occasionally their Remarks.\"\textsuperscript{36} The ability of the rest of the group to engage in conversation with Johnson and the Provost was due

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  \item Letters by the commander of the British fleet had reached British newspapers by September 1779: John Byron, "From the London Gazette... Copy of a Letter from the Honourable Vice-Admiral Byron to Mr. Stephens, Dated Princess Royal at Sea, the 8th of July, 1779," \textit{Cumberland Pacquet, and Ware's Whitehaven Advertiser}, September 21, 1779, 5th ed., http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk.
  \item Samuel Johnson, \textit{The Letters of Samuel Johnson/1777-1781}, vol. III. 213 fn.4.
  \item Wheeler, \textit{Famous Blue-stockings}. 158.
  \item Ibid, 104.
  \item Ibid, 105.
\end{itemize}
to the arrangement Vesey placed the group around the two. The tactic was a deliberate maneuver on the part of Vesey. In respect to sharing similar concerns with Montagu of preventing card games from interrupting opportunities of conversation, the two had very distinct ideas on how to go about doing that. Both differed vastly in how to assemble the group. As Montagu upheld the “Method of the Circle,” Vesey held to disintegrating it.37

Montagu placed the group in a semi-circle with individuals seated according to rank on one side and those eminent in talent on the other.38 Such a positioning of seats, even within an informal gathering, was novel as most social events in Eighteenth Century London were conducted in a regular circle.39 But such innovation was not without its critics. One such person was none other than Macartney’s sister-in-law, Lady Louisa Stuart.40 Stuart had mixed feelings about the semi-circle arrangement. Within a refreshing facetious way, Stuart told of how “[a] circle[,]... though the worst shape imaginable for easy familiar conversation[,] may be the best for a brilliant interchange of -I had nearly said snip-snap - of pointed sentences and happy repartees.”41 Stuart obviously was either bored or frustrated with the arrangement that Montagu prescribed to.

Vesey’s motivation to “square the circle” was likely based on her derision of the slightest slack in conversation.42 Vesey had such a “fear of ceremony... that she insist[ed] upon everybody’s sitting with back one to another; that is, the chairs [we]re drawn into little parties of three together, in a confused manner, all over the room.”43 Much of this motivation was based on her quirky personality (her nickname was Sylph— an imaginary spirit in the air) and her inability to hear very well.44 Her personality, on the other hand, fit well with the informal circumstances and many of the participants, hoping for an intriguing conversation, would empathize with her methods.

William Pepys, who also was in attendance at Mr. Vesey’s on Wednesday evening November 10, 1779, described Vesey: “with no advantage of appearance and manner, she possessed, with a reserve of good sense, that easy politeness that gained everyone [sic] in a moment, and had the almost magic art of putting all the company at their

39 Burney, Memoirs of Dr. Burney. 271.
40 In February 1768, Macartney married Lady Louisa’s sister, Lady Jane Stuart. He had just returned from his first successful diplomatic post in Russia: John Barrow and George Macartney Macartney, Some Account of the Public Life, and a Selection from the Unpublished Writings, of the Earl of Macartney..., vol. 1, 2 vols. (London: Printed for T. Cadell and W. Davies in the Strand, 1807). 37.
41 Wheeler, Famous blue-stockings. 182.
42 Ibid, 184.
43 Ibid, 185.
44 Ibid, 57, 184.
ease.” Though Pepys placed Vesey in rather fantastical terms, his statements is a testament to the unified steps upon which Vesey embarked upon to mesh her own personal sensibilities with active manipulation of the space.

To recognize the contribution of Montagu and Vesey properly, the perspective should first be placed within their own personal and intellectual pursuits. The outlook should not be solely placed within the view that they overcame constraints placed upon them as women in Eighteenth Century England. Though there were gender constraints which they had to overcome, their ability to do so was more advantageous due to wealth and their conformity to propriety. The best way to distinguish that is to discuss Lady Craven as a means to contrast motivations of the Blue Stockings.

— Lady Craven —

Lady Craven was very different from the Blue Stockings in both how she lived a carefree life and how she could care very little about how they perceived her as improper. Due to improprieties mostly involving an unfaithful husband, Elizabeth Craven was considered an outsider. Several years after marrying Lord Craven at sixteen years of age and having seven children, Macartney caught Mrs. Craven’s husband one day with another woman out in public. Elizabeth had been suspicious of William Craven’s infidelity for some time. Macartney, by the time of this unfortunate revelation, had become a true confidant. Lady Craven more than likely would have met Macartney through her cousin Charles Fox, a member of the Club. Craven was an educated bourgeois lady but was somewhat eccentric in her choice of persons with whom she invited to dinner. This eccentricity ostracized her from the mainstream social circles, most particularly the Blue Stockings. Craven did attempt to make acquaintances with Mrs. Montagu earlier on but to no avail. The reason that kept her away from the Blue Stockings was not because of her sociability, but that her choice of friends violated Montagu’s sense of morality.

Lady Craven’s cosmopolitan sensibility and egalitarian attitude towards others were enough to create an atmosphere of amicable conversation. Macartney, along with

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47 Ibid, 42.
50 Ibid, 41.
Johnson and other members of the Club, enjoyed her intellectual proclivities. Johnson wrote to Mrs. Thrale on April 18, 1780 stating that even though he was dizzy from being on an “alternate diet,” he was still “going to dine with Lady Craven.” Boswell remarked in Life that Johnson “dined one day with beautiful, gay, and fascinating Lady Craven.” To his footnote he added: “Lord Macartney... told me that he met Johnson at Lady Craven’s, and that he seem jealous of any interference: ‘So (said his Lordship, smiling,) I kept back.’” In fact, Johnson and other members of the Club would frequently socialize with Craven in London. Johnson also made frequent visits to check in on her oldest son’s tutoring (for which he recommended to her). Lord Macartney also was often at Lady Craven’s house. Craven developed a friendly relationship with Macartney based on trust, as the incident Macartney witnessed with Lord Craven can be attributed. Craven provided other glimpses of the closeness of this relationship. Craven’s friendship to Macartney was interwoven with Johnson’s acquaintance. Macartney would tease her by threatening to tell Johnson that she wrote poetry. Craven and Macartney knew that Johnson, who had recently published his first edition of Lives of the Poets in 1779, was one of the most acerbic literary critics of his day. Another literary conversation came about after the unfortunate death of fellow Club member and theater actor, David Garrick.

Garrick’s death in 1779 had a lasting impact on the members of the Club. Macartney broached the topic with Craven as to whether Johnson was going to allow another bookseller, Thomas Davies, to write on the life of Garrick. Johnson relayed the answer in the affirmative by stating that the “bookseller is quite equal to the task.” Lady Craven, reflecting the important contribution of Garrick to the English theater and his vast personable skills, took exception and stated that Johnson should write the biography himself. Craven voiced her opinion against Johnson. She was clearly capable, as symbolized in her intellectual interactions, in expressing her own thoughts.

Prior to completing the key analysis of the women involved with Macartney and Johnson, important conclusions should be made related reciprocally to both women within the Hevia-Habermas model. Foremost, the intent was to shine light on the

51 Gasper, Elizabeth Craven. 35-36.
53 Boswell and Tinker, Boswell’s Life of Johnson. 15.
54 Ibid, fn2.
55 Craven, Broadley, and Melville, the Beautiful Lady Craven, vol. 1. 38
56 Craven, Broadley, and Melville, the Beautiful Lady Craven, vol. 2. 113.
57 Ibid, 114.
58 Ibid, 114.
59 Boswell and Tinker, Be/swell’s Life of Johnson, i, 280.
60 Ibid, 115.
61 Garrick was once a young student of Johnson during the failed attempt by Johnson in 1735 to earn a living as a teacher. Walter Jackson Bate, Samuel Johnson (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch, 1977). 154.
motivations of the Blue Stockings’ direct changing of the physical environment and Lady Craven’s intellectual interactions as symbolizing cultural productions within English bourgeois society. A reasonable assumption is made that women initiated a methodical interaction with these men on a literary and intellectual level without any immediate male forbearance on those interactions, but that the men mutually engaged within anyways.

To be clear, the intent here is not to imply that on a broad societal level the gender relationship in late Eighteenth Century England was equitable. Julia Gasper stated that Craven represented an Eighteenth Century feminist who “believed women... ought to be emancipated from enforced marriage, treated as equal by their husbands, enabled to earn their own living... and entitled to far better education...”62 This statement provides a catalyst in maintaining that women were primary agents in their own lives and now, factoring that in, we can step off to where we can examine the subject matter of Johnson’s conversation.

— What Johnson Discussed —

Lord Macartney was impacted by the virtuous actions on the part of the Blue Stockings’ deliberate manipulation of the social space to facilitate Johnson’s moral conversations and Lady Craven’s moral fortitude. In addition, the British diplomat’s view of the gifts as an act of virtue was guided by listening in on Johnson’s own words. Surprisingly, Craven provided more insight into Johnson’s stance on morals. Craven described Johnson as rather outspoken. When she told in her memoirs about how Macartney would tease her, her preamble was that “the great fault which I found with Johnson was the inveterate blame and contempt that he threw on all contemporary writers.”63 Her concern over Johnson stemmed from the impertinent moral high ground in which he took and was constantly reinforced by those who heard him. Craven knew that Johnson ate a lot and suffered incontinence:

Johnson was bilious, and had the spleen; for the long silence he often observed, alike with the wise or foolish, was sometimes broken by him in a manner unsought for; as it was kept by him often in spite of all the endeavours of the wise or witty to break it. But when he did speak, what language he uttered, with what energy he defended virtue, with what comic satire he held up folly or vice!64

Johnson spoke of virtue because, for Craven, he had “step[ped] forth into the world in the character of a moralist.”65 Beside the gastronomic weaknesses of Johnson that added an air of spectacle to his speech, the content of what he spoke was most remembered. Another comment from Pepys, the one who was in attendance at Vesey’s

62 Gasper, Elizabeth Craven, xxv.
63 Craven, Broadley, and Melville, the Beautiful Lady Craven, vol. 2.114.
64 Ibid, 114.
65 Ibid, 115.
residence on May 1780, positioned Johnson’s conversation within an ethical configuration. Pepys recalled how “they talked or were silent, sat or walked about, just as they pleased, while Johnson in one corner might be holding forth on the moral duties.” The group's consensus was, for the most part, that Johnson was a great speaker and he spoke eloquently of morality. Mrs. Thrale summed up the overall opinion of him when she said that “his discourse generally ended in an ethical dissertation.”

One ideal that Craven mentioned was virtue. Harkening back to Gasper’s words describing the uniqueness of Craven and Eighteenth Century feminism, virtue was purposely extended beyond the confines of a faithful wife and mother. The Blue Stockings kept within the conservative values of the time, as evidenced by their own sense of propriety that they acted upon by pushing Craven out of the inner circles of the organization. But in defense of the Blue Stockings, Craven still held strongly to contemporary notions of motherhood and raising her children as an important part of her life. Much of Craven’s attitude stemmed from her personal struggles: a negligent mother, who focused more on the eldest daughter, and an unfaithful husband, who spent most of his time playing the horses. Secondly, Craven shared a common virtuous trait with the Blue Stockings in their dedicated service to caring for the London poor.

Public works was an important concept introduced to the overarching ideal of virtue played out within the Hevia-Habermas model. For Eighteenth Century bourgeois women, public works meant tangible activities such as charity. Public works also were mediated within the socio-political arena. Though some discussion by women of current political events occurred, men still dominated the political realm. The public sphere was self-defined by men within the political field. Johnson greatly influenced the morality of that self-defining.

Johnson espoused the value that virtuous men should take part within the public sphere. In other words, involvement in the public sphere was an act of virtue. A man of virtue was a man of moral character. This hypothesis, that the defining of the public sphere consisted of moral men, is still drawn from the Hevia-Habermas model. This argument goes further by extending past the model and contemplating the bourgeois public sphere as a moral entity. Johnson provided this moral framework of the public sphere through his writing and verbalizations of the moral principle in the company of men and women willing to listen. To defend Johnson’s character, Boswell connected his Life of Johnson to Johnson's Rambler essays. Boswell established continuity in ensuring

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66 Pepys and Gaussen, A Later Pepys. 52.
68 Gasper, Elizabeth Craven, 41.
69 Ibid, 36.
posterity of this hypothesis. The hypothesis, where we come full circle back to Hevia’s outlook on Macartney, stipulates that the Embassy’s presents to the emperor was a cultural production by means of the extension of the public sphere as a moral imperative.

— Moral character —

A path between Johnson’s morality of the public sphere and Macartney’s endowment of the emperor’s presents with British national character can be seen with Johnson’s published works inventoried in Macartney’s library in 1786. Within the inventory belonging to Johnson were issues of *The Rambler* and *Political Tracts.* Boswell’s *Life,* upon which Macartney also had a copy of, attached Johnson’s development of moral truths to these previous works. British newspapers in the 1770s through early 1780s also connected the moral statements of Johnson to these published works. A newspaper advertisement in 1781 accorded Johnson’s moral “Maxims and Observations” to *The Rambler.* An editorial in 1770 was critical of Johnson’s moral grandstanding in “The False Alarm,” an essay from *Political Tracts.* The writer of the editorial attacked Johnson’s moral position on a political issue by asking rhetorically: “Are these the useful Lessons of Morality, are these the candid Disquisitions of Truth and Justice, held forth to our View and Practice in the Rambler?” Individuals writing to the newspapers were aware of the source of Johnson’s morality. Not only would have Macartney known of Johnson’s position on morality through the newspapers, his knowledge was based also on a personal connection to Johnson greatly enhanced by Vesey and Craven.

— Conclusion —

The goal was to argue for an alternative of the Hevia-Habermas model, besides the Literary Club, whereupon Macartney interacted and was influenced towards a certain ideological outlook on the presents for the Chinese emperor. The discussion focused on women instead of men in order to break the overtly masculine narrative defining modernity. Women sell-defined the bourgeois public sphere through intentional manipulation of the physical space to start a moral debate. This debate was mutually beneficial. This benefit is a testament to Hevia’s theory of cultural productions in the public sphere.

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76 Ibid.
Elizabeth Vesey’s active role in shaping the physical space provides a more grounded viewpoint, both spatially and temporally, of both Johnson and Macartney within British public sphere. Social exchanges can now be effectively placed within Hevia’s definition of “cultural productions.” Blue Stocking events were a more dynamic example of the public sphere than the Club meetings. If we place narrowly the motivations and influences of individuals, as seen in Curtis and Liebert’s patriarchal narrative in *Esto Perpetua*, then we confine ourselves to their ideological view. This hindrance further clouds any potential of agency for women at that time, though still subordinate within the context of Eighteenth Century British society. Women also took part in the public sphere, were engaged in conversation, and received correspondence. They were *women of letters*.

Though Hevia overlooked the potential to add further insight in explaining the British public sphere, the solution can be found in that both men and women in Eighteenth Century England self-defined the public sphere. In historical terms, men and women self-defined the public sphere within different areas. Current theoretical scholarship does not presently project that more dynamic element. Women of the Blue Stockings were active historical agents in expanding their influence beyond the traditional constraints of the home by manipulating the private, familial interior to be part of the public. Macartney was directly influenced by this novel approach of public self-definition by the Blue Stockings.