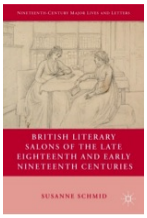
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BRITISH LITERARY SALONS OF THE LATE EIGHTEENTH AND EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURIES



By Susanna Schmid
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Reviewed by Deborah Heller on 2014-02-07.

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In case you didn't already know, the *salon* is a hot topic these days, with new monographs, articles, and collections of essays regularly trumpeting its importance. The word itself suggests a wealth of subjects: salon activities (reading aloud, conversation, literary criticism, and cultural production generally); the material objects of salons (houses, furniture, books, paper, and pens); and, of course, the salonnières themselves-- innovative women taking charge of intellectual sociability and cultural production in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, both in England and on the continent. But what about salons of the nineteenth century? I know quite a bit about salons and salon practice in early-modern England, but I will admit to never having read about or thought much about salons in mid- and later-nineteenth-century London and its environs. To its great credit, this book offers abundant detail about these nineteenth-century salons and their hostesses that most of us never knew about. Unfortunately, however, Schmid does not successfully contextualize this information (valuable as it is) within the bigger picture of British salon history.

Schmid's overarching aim is to restore the English salon, and its particular form of intellectual sociability, "to the pantheon of culturally relevant sites, which has hitherto displayed coffeehouses, museum spaces, theatres, clubs, associations, and churches" (2). More specifically--and this is what most attracted me--she aims to show how the nineteenth-century salon extends the tradition of its eighteenth-century "bluestocking" predecessor "well into and beyond the Romantic period" (3), thus proving that "salons did not come to an abrupt end with the French Revolution, neither in France nor elsewhere, even if their power to cause social and political change waned" (4-5). Anticipating my conclusion, I will state in advance that Schmid's book *does* restore the English salon to a place of genuine interest for literary scholars and historians today. But I am not entirely convinced that the salons she describes extend the "bluestocking tradition"--a phrase she uses but never precisely defines--into the nineteenth century. The salons reconstructed in this book fundamentally differ from those conceived and operated by the eighteenth-century Bluestockings.

Schmid chiefly tries to explain the Who, When, and Where of English salon culture. Theoretical matter--such as Habermas' concept of the "public sphere"--is mostly confined to the first chapter, where it helps to define the salon as a sociable institution "situated between public and private," an "in-between space of mutual visiting and conversation" (13-14). In the remaining six chapters, Schmid presents three women--Mary Berry (1763-1852), Elizabeth Vassal Fox, Lady Holland (1771-1845), and Marguerite Gardiner, Countess of Blessington (1789-1849)--whose literary and (in the case of Holland) political salons met from the close of the eighteenth century through to the middle of the next. Devoting two chapters to each, she examines each woman's salon practices, literary output, friendships, and reputation in her own time.

As explained in the first two chapters, the young Mary Berry was discovered by Horace Walpole (who was, I might note, an original member of Bluestocking gatherings). Through him, we learn, Berry came to know in the late 1780s numerous Bluestockings --Elizabeth Montagu, Hannah More, and possibly others. Of the three women featured in this book, Schmid writes, Berry "resembles the bluestockings most closely in her [literary] output," which included the "male territory of historiography and drama" (174). Schmid does not indicate, however, which Bluestockings she thinks Berry resembles, or just what she means by terms such as "historiography." (Berry was not a professional historian like Catherine Macaulay.)

Schmid says very little about Berry's activities as a salonnière because, as she admits, we have almost no record of her salon practice: "As textual records of sociable activities and conversations are usually produced in retrospect, they often summarize and abbreviate drastically. The account of a convivial evening is often merely a terse diary entry or a short passage in a letter" (55). Her concluding claim for Berry's importance--that she survived into the late-nineteenth century "as the icon of a brilliant, if somewhat anachronistic, Regency hostess" (69)--does not quite convince, since the book offers no actual examples of her own conversation or her style of interaction with her guests. This lack of information may explain why Schmid's subchapter on Berry's salon is as short as it is--less than five pages--far shorter, for example, than the ample, detailed sections on her friendships with Walpole and Anne Damer, her "private theatricals" (plays performed in domestic settings), her cosmopolitan travels, and her editing and writing.

Schmid's brief analysis of Berry's relationship to the Bluestockings, then, does not substantiate her initial assertion "that the bluestocking tradition continued well into and beyond the Romantic period." In fact, Chapter 3 provides some evidence to the contrary. For one thing, Berry's contemporaries disagreed about the extent of her true *blueness*; Harriet Martineau opined that she was not "express blue" but only "rather blue" (qtd. 59). Furthermore, according to Schmid, Berry

herself "did not like parties dominated by female guests," which she associated specifically with the "rational" gatherings of the Bluestockings (57). Indeed, she strategically identified herself with a social group quite distinct from the Blues--what Schmid calls her "aristocratic" and "social elite" connections (59). By so doing she distanced herself from the very idea of "bluestocking," which, after 1792, had become so disagreeable in the popular imagination that it was "no label an educated woman would aspire to." Though Schmid claims that the Bluestockings really *were* Berry's true "intellectual and social forebears" (59), she does not make a persuasive case for this point.

She makes a somewhat stronger case for Lady Holland, whose role in operating an important nineteenth-century salon is beyond question. After she entered the ranks of the salonnières through marriage to her second husband, the third Lord Holland, they both together hosted assemblies at Holland House --a "powerful cultural and political center between 1797 and 1840" and "the most prestigious" of the three salons described in Schmid's study (72). Starting in the middle of the eighteenth century with Henry Fox, first Lord Holland, Holland House had a long history as a convivial Whig gathering place, and when the third Lord Holland and his wife took it over it became one of London's chief cultural centers, attracting both literary and political grandees (99-101). But how consequential was Lady Holland herself? Though Schmid brilliantly explains the importance of Holland House as a center of intellectual and political activity, it is not clear that its importance owed much to Lady Holland. For one thing--and here I might note a distinctive difference from the Bluestocking salon--the conversational scene at Holland House was plainly dominated by men. Schmid mentions only a few female guests, Germaine de Staël among them; and since most of the guests as well as the chroniclers of the parties, we are told, were men who "may not have considered women as important guests," female guests may have silently disappeared (100).

In any case, there is scant evidence that Lady Holland or any other woman took an important role in the literary or political debates at Holland House. Lady Holland's journals, letters, and "Dinner Books" briefly describe dinners and evening gatherings ("a good deal of company," "a large party"), but it is impossible to tell how much she participated in the intellectual conversations that took place at these dinners. In particular, the records do not tell us whether Holland House was *her* cultural venue, where she set the agenda, or her husband's cultural and political venue, within which she was performing an instrumental and ancillary role. In Bluestocking assemblies, hostesses such as Elizabeth Montagu, Elizabeth Vesey, Hester Thrale, and Frances Boscawen were the *chief operators*. As the organizers and key actors in these gatherings, they conscientiously resisted the conventional practice of dividing guests into sexually segregated groups before or after dinner. At Holland House, however, male guests commonly retreated for "predinner conversation with Lord Holland about politics" or "join[ed] Lord Holland for breakfast," where they also discussed politics (101).

Whatever Lady Holland's precise role in the activities of Holland House really was, she clearly had some privileges: she was free to boss and bully her male guests, who retaliated by mocking her both in their writings and in person. With sarcastic jokes and jibes regularly animating Holland House conversation, Lady Holland was designated in letters, diaries, and novels as "the 'centurion,' 'Old Madagascar,' the witch with a cat" (81). "Why," Schmid asks, "was she represented in such a negative light?" (81). Her answer--"Maybe the gossips around her simply expressed an anxiety that only a strong and influential woman could raise"--might be right, but the mockery sprang in part from the particular social atmosphere of this salon. Although, as Schmid explains, a love of "verbal combat" and an "emphasis on wit" characterized Holland House conversation, it lacked "politeness"--in the eighteenth-century sense of that word as an ideal conducive to mixed-gender sociability (102). From Schmid's own findings, then, I infer that Holland House fostered male contention. Since the Bluestocking ideal of polite conversation was *not* part of its culture, the sharp-edged verbal climate may have worked against women, including Lady Holland herself, who then resorted to what her guests perceived as "imperious" tactics. Thomas Macaulay's description of her taciturnity, suggestively juxtaposed with Lord Holland's sociability, captures the peculiar role she seems to have played:

> She is certainly a woman of considerable talents and great literary acquirements. To me she was excessively gracious; yet there is a haughtiness in her courtesy which, even after all I had heard of her, surprised me. The centurion did not keep his soldiers in better order than she keeps her guests. It is to one "Go," and he goeth; and to another "Do this," and it is done. "Ring the bell, Mr. Macaulay." "Lay down the screen, Lord Russell; you will spoil it." "Mr. Allen, take a candle and show Mr. Craddock the picture of Buonaparte." Lord Holland is, on the other hand, all kindness, simplicity, and vivacity. He talked very well both on politics and on literature. (qtd. 76)

Given her conventional role as the organizer of largely-male dinner parties, Lady Holland may indeed have been the "least blue" of the three salonnières, as Schmid says (174). Nevertheless, Schmid adds, she was "very capable at moving things, ideas, people, and print products," as can be seen in her involvement in "huge collaborative efforts like the Edinburgh Review" (174). So perhaps she was something like Berry--*blue* in her commitment to cultural projects but distanced from the specific practices of the "bluestocking tradition" because of changes in the cultural climate: a point to which I will return at the end of this review.

The Countess of Blessington might be another distanced descendant of the Bluestockings. Contra Schmid, I see Blessington rather than Berry as closest to the famous eighteenth-century hostesses. Schmid's description of Blessington's "brilliant conversation" (133) brings to mind the Bluestocking Elizabeth Montagu, whose verbal power was much celebrated by her guests (an interesting parallel Schmid overlooks). Both women also owed the success of their salons to what Schmid aptly calls a "theatrical sociability": Blessington fashioned her "celebrity status" through her numerous literary productions as well as through her salon activities. In her *Conversations of Lord Byron* (serialized in 1832-33 and published as a book in 1834), Blessington used dramatized conversations with the famous poet not simply as a record of Byron's witticisms and opinions--opinions which everyone wanted to read about at this moment of the poet's greatest fame--but also as a means of producing *herself* as a cultural commodity--a "celebrity hostess" and literary "star" (126-132).

Why was Blessington so successful at self-fashioning? The answer is two-fold. First of all, and again much like Montagu, she was extraordinarily ambitious. She thrived on public involvement and consciously sought "publicity" through her salon and her numerous travelogues and novels. In later life, however, she had little money. Worse yet, she was dogged by a tarnished reputation for having been Lord Blessington's mistress before their marriage. She thus needed to make her own way, and the way she chose (unlike both Mary Berry and Lady Holland) entailed using publicity to make herself into a "brand name" (124). Second, Blessington had media opportunities that earlier salonnières--especially Mary Berry--simply lacked. As Schmid notes: "self-fashioning was far more noticeable in a mass print culture that was constantly on the lookout for celebrities" (124).

Blessington's salon practice, then, reflects an orientation towards publicity comparable to that of the Bluestockings. In other ways, however, such as the dearth of women, her salon is fundamentally different from those operated by the Blues. As Schmid notes, her regulars included "[b]arely any women," and "[a]mong those who avoided her was Lady Holland, who, as a divorcé, received similar treatment and had more male than female visitors" (136). It seems, then, that the salons of both Blessington and Holland actually functioned as networking sites for male literati and not as Bluestocking-inspired gathering places where women were equal actors in the intellectual exchange. In the end, Blessington comes across as a woman straining desperately for the social influence she simply could not gain.

Schmid says disappointingly little about the change in salon culture between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, save that Blessington was hostile to other hostesses of her day (Holland and Berry among them) and that the "cult of female friendship" associated with the eighteenth-century salonnières "had no place among the London hostesses of the 1830s" (135). The question that remains at the end of this book--a question Schmid never addresses--is this: what changed English salons after the turn of the century? Why were nineteenth-century salonnières made to operate in such predominantly masculinized spaces? Why was female celebrity greeted with such ambivalence or outright hostility by male literary stars like Byron and Edgar Allan Poe? In her last pages Schmid invokes the all-purpose term "patriarchy" to excuse Blessington's "escapist" reading habits (171) and other shortcomings, but this gesture does little to explain the cultural chasm between eighteenth- and nineteenth-century salons. Even Schmid's epilogue leaves questions unanswered rather than resolved, casting serious doubt on the relationship between the Blues and their successors (174-5). In sum, this is a useful book marred by serious shortcomings. Had Schmid contextualized the salonnières she writes about, placing them within the "big picture" of salon culture from 1750 to 1850, her book would have been more than merely useful. It would have been a landmark in salon criticism.

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