

Book Review

Brilliant Women: 18th-Century Bluestockings. Elizabeth Eger and Lucy Peltz. London: Yale University Press, 2008; illustrations; 159pages; ISBN 9780300141030; \$60.50 (paper).

Published as part of a joint venture with the National Portrait Gallery of London to bring together “brilliant women” from eighteenth-century Bluestockings to modern-day feminist icons such as Germaine Greer, *Brilliant Women* uniquely uses portraiture and biography to explore how the Bluestockings’ intellectual and cultural achievements were received by their contemporaries.¹ Drawing on the work of feminist scholars, this interdisciplinary project skillfully examines the ‘rise and fall’ of the Bluestockings, “scholarly or intellectual wom(e)n...who met to debate contemporary ideas and promote the life of the mind.”² While gender is at the heart of this discussion, the authors also perceptively examine the profoundly transformative effects of the American and French Revolutions, the expansion of the printing press, and the rise of literacy and conspicuous consumption on English society, culture, economics, and politics.³

Featuring eighty-four colour and sixty-four black-and-white illustrations, co-authors Elizabeth Eger and Lucy Peltz have created a stunning landscape of female achievement and the possibilities available to some wealthy and educated women in the eighteenth-century.⁴ Apart from lengthy discussions of prominent Bluestockings Elizabeth Montagu, “Queen of the Bluestockings,” Elizabeth Carter, and Hannah More, it is often difficult to determine which of the “brilliant women” surveyed in this volume actually identified themselves as members of the Bluestocking Circle.⁵ Moreover, the sources are heavily weighted in the direction of analyses of primary materials and references to secondary sources are sparse, which unfortunately leaves readers familiar with recent scholarship on the Bluestockings wanting more.⁶ Nevertheless, by focusing on portraits, prints, and engravings, this project serves as an astute reminder that until relatively recently, most men and women were illiterate. Hence, by using these images as texts, Eger and Peltz

¹ Eger, Elizabeth and Peltz, Lucy. *Brilliant Women: 18th-Century Bluestockings.* (London: Yale University Press, 2008), p. 8, 19, 145.

² Eger and Peltz, p. 8, 14, 16-8.

³ Eger and Peltz, p. 21, 24, 31, 34, 95, 99-100, 106-8, 111-12.

⁴ Eger and Peltz, p. 16, 21, 24-5, 43, 47, 84, dust-jacket back flap.

⁵ Eger and Peltz, p. 16, 21-2, 24-32, 33, 43, 45, 68-70, 116-8, 142-3.

⁶ The Select Bibliography and suggestions for Further Reading does however demonstrate that the authors are familiar with the recent scholarship on the Bluestockings and other women writers and painters in eighteenth-century England. (Eger and Peltz, p. 152-4.)

convincingly explore the visual language and culture of eighteenth-century audiences that existed beyond, and sometimes in place of, the written word.

Over four chapters examining friendship, patronage, learning, professional identities, and legacies, these vivid illustrations are analyzed alongside poems, letters, newspaper articles, and broadside reviews of the Bluestockings' celebrated cultural power in the eighteenth-century.⁷ In the wake of the Napoleonic Wars and the very public scandals surrounding the sexual conduct of political radicals Catharine Macaulay and Mary Wollstonecraft, however, the prospect of financially independent and professional women writers and painters was often viewed in misogynistic terms as a threat to the social fabric of the nation.⁸ As evidence of the successful campaign to eradicate the achievements of the Bluestockings from memory, by the late nineteenth-century women writers like Virginia Woolf lamented the fact that they had no female role models to draw upon.⁹ While Eger and Peltz correctly conclude that tracing the history of English women from the Bluestockings to Modern Muses is "not a tale of simple progress," their final remark, "(p)erhaps it was easier to be a bluestocking in the eighteenth-century than it is in our own age," dramatically highlights that female intellectuals continue to struggle for recognition and acceptance.¹⁰ Thus, *Brilliant Women* serves as a compelling reminder that the often turbulent history of educated, professional, and philanthropic women began long before the rise of feminism or the activism of nineteenth-century suffragettes and temperance movements.

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⁷ Eger and Peltz, p. 17, 27, 29, 31, 36, 43, 53, 63, 69, 82-3, 127.

⁸ Eger and Peltz, p. 18, 34, 77, 127-8, 130, 134.

⁹ Eger and Peltz, p. 8, 127, 131, 133-4.

¹⁰ Eger and Peltz, p. 16, 18, 148, 149.