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## Review of "Mothers of the Nation: Women's Political Writing in England, 1780-1830" by Anne Mellor

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# **Anne Mellor, Mothers of the Nation: Women's Political Writing in England, 1780- 1830. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000. ISBN: 0253337135. Price: US\$39.95.**

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One of the central tenets in contemporary feminist criticism has been the doctrine of the separate spheres. In order to understand the literature, history, sociology, and economics of the past two hundred years, feminist critics have invoked as an explanatory paradigm the existence of rigidly demarcated "public" versus "private" spheres. Brought into being through the realities of the capitalistic work and marketplace, the public sphere was understood as the domain of the male; it was concerned with the business of politics, the workplace, and social and economic institutions. The private sphere, in contrast, was the domain where women held sway. Within the home and hearth, and perhaps most broadly the church, women could hold power only within the narrow confines of their own homes, or perhaps their widowed father's or unmarried brother's. This explanatory paradigm has been dominant in the writings of historians and literary critics of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries for the past forty years, while a few scholars (Amanda Vickery, Paula Backscheider, Timothy Dykstal, and Linda Colley among others) have attempted to challenge its hegemony as a social and historical construct that explains the way gender was bifurcated in Britain during the eighteenth century and later in America.

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Anne Mellor's new book, *Mothers of the Nation*, seeks precisely to challenge this construct and refute the dominance that the public/private sphere theory has had on understanding the literature of the British romantic era. Mellor's argument takes as its central thesis the claim that "women writers had an enormous—and hitherto largely uncredited—impact on the formation of public opinion in England between 1780 and 1830" (p.11). Mellor disputes the position of John Brewer, for instance, who sees the public sphere "invading" and "colonizing" the private sphere, and instead argues the reverse: "the values of the private sphere associated primarily with women—moral virtue and an ethic of care—infiltrated and finally dominated the discursive public sphere" (p. 11). Her evidence rests largely on the career and writings of Hannah More, but the book also includes discussions of Joanna Baillie's *Count Basil*, the numerous plays by Hannah Cowley and Elizabeth Inchbald, the political poetry of Helen Maria Williams, Anna Letitia Barbauld, Lucy Aikin, the literary criticism of many of these same writers, and finally the novels of Charlotte Smith (*Desmond*) and Jane Austen (*Persuasion*).

The book obviously covers a lot of ground, and some of these works are dealt with in more detail than others. If I had any initial criticism of the book, it was that I would have liked to have read in more detail about the plays of Cowley and Inchbald, more about Hannah More's works, more extended discussions, in short, of material that Mellor has very usefully unearthed for us. But Mellor is one of the premier feminist literary critics in the tradition of the rediscovery or recovery of lost women writers and works, and she has performed that service again to an admirable extent. Like her earlier *Romanticism and Gender* (1993), she has opened up new vistas for other critics working in the field to explore, and certainly her recovery of More will do much for the neglected reputation and understanding of More as an important romantic writer of the period.

The sections on Hannah More, as I said, carry the bulk of the argument for the misunderstood status of women as writers of public influence during this period. Mellor's task is perhaps daunting, for she wants to depict these women writers as not simply in service of a pronounced and important public role, but a liberal one at that. At face value, More would not seem to be a promising subject for such an enterprise. Long criticized for her involvement in if not leadership of the conservative Evangelical movement, not to mention the Ann Yearsley affair, More has been the target of criticism from Marxists, who have seen her as participating in "an oppressive project of social control" of the poor (p. 16). Feminist literary critics have also not been favorably disposed toward More's works, seeing her "a willing participant in a patriarchal order who used the Evangelical movement to position herself as the social superior to her lower-class sisters" (p. 17). In order to make her case for More as "the most influential woman living in England in the Romantic era" (p. 13), Mellor makes five major claims: that More's writings helped to prevent a violent revolution in England; that her works reformed rather than subverted the prevailing social order; that her criticisms were aimed at the aristocracy, the clergy, the working class, and women; that her work provided a new moral understanding of capitalism and consumption; and that these spiritual critiques were so widespread that they actually produced a revolution of their own, not in politics, but in the behavior of individuals (p. 14).

Mellor's case rests on her analysis of several of the propagandistic Cheap Repository Tracts, all of which advocate More's particular political philosophy: "a constitutional monarchy that recognizes its legal limits and fulfills its economic and religious obligations to preserve the 'safety, comfort, and peace' of all its subjects" (p. 25). In her only novel, *Coelebs in Search of a Wife* (1808), More depicted the "concept of female virtue [that] stood in stark contrast to her culture's prevailing definition of the ideal woman as one who possessed physical beauty and numerous accomplishments and who could effectively entice a man of substance into marriage" (p. 26). Instead, More advocated education for women followed by a life of active virtue, missionary service to the poor, and thus an increasingly visible and empowered position for women in society. Finally, More's most important writing might be her *Hints towards forming the Character of a Young Princess* (1805), written for Princess Charlotte, the only child of

George IV and the presumptive heir to the throne. Although Charlotte tragically died in childbirth, she was reborn, so to speak, when the young Victoria assumed the throne, becoming the sort of female ruler that More had prepared her country to accept, even demand: "after the career of Hannah More, the symbolic representation of this new national identity had to be female; only a woman, in the historical case, Queen Victoria, could literally embody and thus transparently represent British national virtue, that Christian virtue that More had everywhere in her writings gendered as female" (p. 38).

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The very interesting chapter on More is followed by "The Theater as a School for Social Virtue," a chapter that examines the dramas of Baillie, More, Cowley, and Inchbald. For Mellor, these major female playwrights "consciously used the theater to re-stage and thereby revise both the social construction of gender and the nature of good government" (p. 39). Plays such as More's *The Search after Happiness*, Cowley's *A Day in Turkey*, and *The Belle's Stratagem* put on public display portraits of the "new woman," "a rational, compassionate, merciful, tolerant, and peace-loving woman better equipped to rule the nation than the men currently in power" (p. 39). Female playwrights also challenged the position and actions of the English monarchy, arguing that it did little to protect the rights of women. As a genre that was particularly well suited to promote social reform, the theater served as almost a "public school for females, one that could be used to correct the inappropriate or inadequate education many girls received at home" (p. 40).

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The next chapter, "Women's Political Poetry," focuses on More's "Slavery," Williams's "Peru," Barbauld's "Eighteen Hundred and Eleven," and Aikin's "Epistles on Women," all poems that advocate a women's movement that would "overthrow the existing construction of gender and ensure the equality, perhaps even the social and political equality, of the female" (p. 80). The chapter "Literary Criticism, Cultural Authority, and the Rise of the Novel," looks at critical statements written by Baillie, Barbauld, Inchbald, Reeve, Seward, and Wollstonecraft. In all of these writers, Mellor detects a critical theory that is radically different from the aesthetic values promulgated by such male critics as Wordsworth, Coleridge, Hazlitt, Keats, and Percy Shelley. The difference, for Mellor, is in the celebration of the rational mind, "a mind relocated—in a gesture of revolutionary social implications—in the female body" (p. 87). In addition, female literary critics denounced the sort of egoism that characterized the canonical male romantics and instead they advocated a subjectivity in relation to others, "hence a self that is fluid, absorptive, responsive, with permeable ego boundaries....located in its connections with a larger human group, whether family or the social community" (p. 87).

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The final chapter, "The Politics of Fiction," contains extended discussions of two novels, Smith's *Desmond* ("the finest political novel published by anyone in England in the 1790s") and Austen's *Persuasion* ("an example of a woman writer's observations on the political future of England following the defeat of Napoleon in 1815") (p. 106). Mellor sets Smith's novel into its political context, discussing the work's critique of Burke, Filmer, and Locke. A close reading of this text

is given, although the sexual seduction of Josephine de Boisbelle by the hero Desmond is glossed over in a way that Smith herself tried to do. The black hole of female sexuality gapes in this novel, as it does in so many works of the period, and instead Smith encourages us to focus on Geraldine as her heroine-victim. Mellor follows suit, but my interest in Desmond has always been on the submerged text of Josephine and illicit sexuality. Mellor's discussion of *Persuasion* is admirable in its focus on the text as standing "on the cusp of Britain's social and national transformation into a colonial empire on which the sun never set.... Austen affirmed that the project of managing or governing the motherland in a time of peaceful economic expansion is best carried out by women" (p. 138).

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In her "Postscript: The Politics of Modernity," Mellor restates her thesis, "women writers contributed significantly to the success of the abolitionist campaign to end the slave trade and to emancipate the slaves in the British colonies in the West Indies" (p. 142). In addition, the liberal contributions of women writers included bringing about "a visible change in the social construction of gender, by producing the model of a New Woman—a rational, just, yet merciful, virtuous, benevolent, and peace-loving female—who was capable of providing intellectual and moral guidance both at home and in the public realm" (p. 142). For Mellor, More's career epitomizes the intentions of romantic-era women writers. They wanted to reform Britain as a "nation of Christian virtue as well as of liberty" (p. 142). To her credit, Mellor acknowledges the double-sided edge of valorizing the Christian mother, who during the Victorian period found herself ensconced as the "angel in the house," while the trope of the mother of the nation would later be used to justify Britain's colonial imperialism abroad.

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As a final qualification, however, I might quibble with Mellor's need to portray romantic-era women writers as always conforming to a liberal agenda that we as scholars want to endorse as laudable. Women writers did not always advocate for racial equality and inclusiveness. While Mellor cites Amelia Opie's *Adeline Mowbray* as a novelistic text that embraces a Creole woman as the heroine's substitute mother, I might point out Charlotte Dacre's *Zofloya*, a novel that depicts a black male servant as the devil come to earth to wreak havoc by gaining sexual power over white women. In other words, for every example in which women advocated for racial justice and equality, there may very well be another example where they engaged in racial stereotyping and demonization. Until we have a clear understanding of how race functioned in the literally hundreds of literary texts in this period, it will be difficult at best to generalize about any clearcut pattern or attitude that prevailed during the period. But this is a minor question raised about a book that performs a valuable and much needed service: it opens up a largely unexplored terrain of romantic women writers as engaged in a public, political sphere of discourse.