

WOMEN AT WAR: BRITISH WOMEN AND THE DEBATE ON THE WARS AGAINST REVOLUTIONARY FRANCE IN THE 1790s

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As sailors in a storm throw overboard their more useless lumber, so it is but fit that the Men should be exposed to the dangers and hardships of war, while we remain in safety at hom. They are, generally speaking, good for little else but to be our bulwarks.¹

Thus in 1739 'Sophia' sought to justify the masculinity of the military profession, while stating her case for *Woman not inferior to man*. In 1793 war was as imminent a problem for British women as it had been for 'Sophia', and one which kindled similar anxieties about gender and spheres of operation.

After the publication of Richard Price's sermon, *A discourse for the love of our country*, in December 1789, and Edmund Burke's *Reflections of the Revolution in France*, in November 1790, the polarization of British opinions on the French Revolution and its consequences began slowly to crystallize, producing a heated and voluminous pamphlet debate.² Questions were raised of sovereignty

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¹ Quoted in Virginia Sapiro, *A vindication of political virtue. The political theory of Mary Wollstonecraft* (Chicago and London, 1992), 261. 'Sophia' has been variously suggested to have been Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (by Sapiro, loc. cit.) and Lady Sarah Fermer (in *Notes and Queries*, 1897), but there is not enough evidence to prove her identity (cf. Janet Todd [ed.], *A dictionary of British and American woman writers, 1660-1800* [London, 1984], 292).

² On the Revolution debate in Britain, see H T Dickinson, *British radicalism and the French Revolution, 1789-1815* (Oxford, 1985); Thomas Philip Schofield, 'English Conservative Thought and Opinion in Response to the French Revolution 1789-1796', unpublished PhD thesis (University College, London, 1984); Yang Su Hsien, 'The British Debate on the French Revolution: Edmund Burke and His Critics', unpublished PhD thesis (University of Edinburgh, 1989); Mark Philp (ed.), *The French Revolution and British popular politics* (Cambridge, 1991); Gregory Claeys, 'The French Revolution Debate and British Political Thought', *History of Political Thought*, xi (1990), 59-80.

and legitimacy, of the civil liberties and the natural rights of men and women, of absolute and relative truths and values, and of the adequacy of the British constitution itself. The debate was not restricted to the governing and literary classes of society: popular societies and clubs sprang up on either side of the ideological divide even before war was declared between France and Austria in April 1792, such as the radical Constitutional Societies and the resurgent conservative Church and King clubs.³ The outbreak of war between Britain and France in February 1793, in its more direct impact upon the British population, heralded the debate of problems of still greater political complexity. It was not merely that another layer of intensity was added to the debate on the French Revolution, but that new questions, concerning the causes of the war and its purposes, nature, conduct and impact upon both Britain and France, inextricably complicated the previous debate on the Revolution. Moreover, the war was to last for twenty-two years except for the truce of Amiens in 1802-1803, and it was to involve a greater proportion of the British population than any previous international conflict had done. It therefore demanded a response of some sort from an even wider cross-section of the nation than had the Revolution.

The conservative writer Laetitia Matilda Hawkins claimed in her *Letters on the female mind* (1793) that most British women knew very little about the Revolution or the war:

The whole world might be at war and yet not the rumor of it reached the ears of an Englishwoman - empires might be lost, and states overthrown, and still she might pursue the peaceful occupations of her home; and her natural lord might change his governor at pleasure, and she feel neither change nor hardship.⁴

Yet the impositions of this war upon the British people in terms of military participation, vulnerability to a French invasion and liability

³ See Philp (ed.), *The French Revolution and British popular politics*, 1-6.

⁴ Laetitia Matilda Hawkins, *Letters on the female mind* (2 vols., London, 1793), ii, 194.

for providing the material resources required to finance the war effort in fact brought the conflict directly into the lives of most British women as well as men. In terms of direct military involvement, however, women could at most be spectators, not actors, in the drama. Eighteenth-century warfare was a fundamentally male-dominated phenomenon. As necessary spectators, therefore, their views hold interest in the context of the war debate. What did women think about the conflict, and how did they express their opinions?

This further raises the question of how women's involvement in the war debate relates to developing notions of 'separate spheres' of influence and activity for men and women in the 1790s. Over the last two decades historians of gender and class have explored the significance of this concept of separate spheres for British men and women from the mid-eighteenth century to the mid-nineteenth century, and they may be said to have fallen into two similar but distinct camps on the subject. While developments in medical thinking over the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were vital to the theoretical justification of patriarchy in nineteenth-century Britain,⁵ some historians have identified the period from the 1790s to the 1830s as a crucial phase in the development of separate spheres in practice for British men and women. This was partly due to an increasing separation of workplace and home in this period, with the development of industrialization. An increasingly well-off middle class, faced with the choice of women remaining at home or going out to work, could afford the luxury of leisured wives, and wished to be seen to be able to afford it. The growing influence of Evangelical values was also significant. Their role in the anti-slavery campaigns had won the Evangelicals sympathy in public opinion, and it arguably gave greater credibility to their crusade to increase morality in public and private life. An important element in this endeavour was their promotion of the role of wife and mother in creating the home as a safe haven, out of the corrupting influences

⁵ Anthony Fletcher, *Gender, sex and subordination* (New Haven and London, 1995).

of public life. Moreover, the alarm created by the French Revolution, in which French women participated in some of the most radical events of the first four years, together with fears that similar tumultuous social and economic change might overwhelm Britain also, caused conservatives to cling ever more tightly to the 'traditional' social order in which women were subordinate and remained modestly in the background, in the private sphere of life, while men took responsibility for the public sphere of work, politics and leadership.⁶

Others agree that this period witnessed great public anxiety concerning women's involvement in public life, but they argue that the separation of the spheres was more prominent in ideology and rhetoric than in practice and that the public roles of women were at least surviving, if not, indeed, growing in this period.⁷ Linda Colley,

⁶ Catherine Hall, 'The Early Formation of Victorian Domestic Ideology', in S Burman (ed.), *Fit work for women* (Oxford, 1979); Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family fortunes: men and women of the English middle class, 1780-1850* (London, 1987), *passim*; Mary Poovey, *The proper lady and the woman writer: ideology as style in the works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley and Jane Austen* (Chicago and London, 1984), x-35; Cynthia L White, *Women's magazines, 1693-1968* (London, 1970), 32-41. For a comparative view of the position of women in revolutionary France, see Olwen H Hufton, *Women and the limits of citizenship in the French Revolution* (Toronto, 1992).

⁷ Neil McKendrick, 'Home Demand and Economic Growth: A New View of the Role of Women and Children in the Industrial Revolution', in *Historical perspectives: studies in English thought and society in honour of J H Plumb* (London, 1974), ed. McKendrick, 152-210; Karl von den Steinen, 'The Discovery of Women in Eighteenth-century English Political Life', in Barbara Kanner, ed., *The women of England* (Hamden, Conn., 1979), 229-258; Mitzi Myers, 'Reform or Ruin: "A Revolution in Female Manners"', *Studies in Eighteenth-century Culture*, 11 (1982), 199-216; Rosalind K Marshall, *Virgins and viragos: a history of women in Scotland from 1080 to 1980* (London, 1983), 167-188; Linda Colley, *Britons. Forging the nation 1707-1837* (Yale, 1992), 237-281; Dror Wahrman, 'Middle Class Domesticity Goes Public: Gender, Class and Politics from Queen Caroline to Queen Victoria', *Journal of British Studies*, xxxii (1993), esp. 408-9. See also Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, 'Placing Women's History in History', *New Left Review*, 133 (1982), 5-29; on women in France, see Darline Gay Levy and Harriet B Applewhite, 'Women of the Popular Classes in

for example, has recently argued that the French wars both underlined the perceived functional differences between men and women and yet enlarged the boundaries of women's activities. She suggests that the fund-raising, sock-knitting, banner-sewing activities engaged in by British women during the war were not just a socially acceptable extension of the 'traditional female virtues of charity, nurture and needlework' into the military sphere, but rather 'the thin end of a far more radical wedge', because they demonstrated that these domestic skills possessed 'a public as well as a private relevance'.⁸ The present study examines the evidence of women's contributions to Britain's pamphlet debate on the war, as well as journals and letters written by women, and finds these to underline Colley's conclusion. Not only did women involve themselves in war-related activities to a far greater extent than they had done in previous wars, despite public disquiet, as Colley argues; they also took a serious interest in the issues raised by the conflict, and they ventured to express their opinions in print to a much greater extent than had been the case in previous wars. At the same time, however, anxieties in Britain concerning the proper roles of women seem, if anything, to have been heightened by the experience of the war.

The difficulties of attempting to assess the significance of the written attitude of British women to the wars against revolutionary France are largely concerned with the lack of evidence. Those women who left detailed written records of their opinions on the conflict were usually exceptional people as well as unusual women for their time, and they are few in number. Female readership was restricted by household income and by literacy rates (which were rather lower than male literacy rates).⁹ Furthermore, men wrote

Revolutionary Paris, 1789-1795', in *Women, war and revolution* (New York and London, 1980), eds. Carol R Berkin and Clara M Lovett, 9-35.

⁸ Colley, *Britons*, 261-262.

⁹ James Raven, *Judging new wealth: popular publishing and responses to commerce in England, 1750-1800* (Oxford, 1992), 56-8. Between the mid-eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries, nationwide literacy levels, as measured by ability to sign the marriage register, were raised from about 60% for men and

much of the literature directed at women. *The Lady's Magazine* and other periodicals for women were edited by men and mostly written by men; and, as Stella M Ni Ghalchóir Cottrell points out, while several pamphlets were signed by 'an Englishwoman' or 'Britannia', the text suggests that they were written by men.¹⁰ For these reasons, the following sections rely mostly on texts whose authorships are reasonably certain.

Yet the question of female views on the war is important enough, though generally neglected,¹¹ to be considered seriously on the basis of what evidence there is. Their opinions were naturally often very similar to those of men, but it is arguable that, whatever part of the political or social spectrum they represented, women consistently emphasised certain issues and concerns. Moreover, not only were they trying to answer the questions posed also for men by the war (issues of the grounds and aims of the war, its nature and conduct, and the question of peace) but, in a war which had a direct impact on a very wide cross-section of society over such a long period of time, they also struggled with the question of their own role in a society at war. Their very contribution to the literary debate on the war was therefore questioned for its validity and propriety. In the decade in which Mary Wollstonecraft published her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), this controversy provided an immediate illustration of some of the issues she had raised concerning the nature and rights of women. This article will examine the opinions of female writers on the grounds, nature and conduct of the war and their views on women's involvement in it, and also men's attitudes towards women's participation in the conflict and in the debates surrounding it, in order to set these

about 40% for women to about 66% and 50% respectively. See Thomas Laqueur, 'The Cultural Origins of Popular Literacy in England, 1500-1800', *Oxford Review of Education*, 2:3 (1976), 255; A Digby and P Searby, *Children, schools and society in nineteenth-century England* (London, 1981), 6.

¹⁰ Stella M Ni Ghalchóir Cottrell, 'English views of France and the French, 1789-1815', unpublished D Phil thesis (Oxford, 1991), 97 n.1.

¹¹ Exceptions include Colley, *Britons*, 250-262; Cottrell, 'English Views', 95-146.

female war-time activities and publications in the context of the male-dominated public stage onto which they had ventured.

I

Women were clearly affected by the conflict against revolutionary France both directly and profoundly but, on the whole, they responded practically on the margins of military activity. Where they extended the boundaries of their participation in public life, they nevertheless adhered to socially acceptable 'female' channels of activity, such as sewing, knitting, making presentations and donations, and generally supporting male activity. Their engagement in the pamphlet debate on the war was, however, possibly the most radical wartime activity in which women were involved, no matter how conservative the contents of some of their publications, for not only did they express their views in print to a considerably greater extent than had been the case in any previous war,¹² but this also demonstrated that women were able and willing to discuss a political phenomenon such as war and its issues intelligently and publicly. Publications by women such as Hannah More and Mary Wollstonecraft were substantial contributions to the war debate and its propaganda,¹³ and other women, such as Fanny Burney, Hester Piozzi, Helen Maria Williams, Anna Laetitia Barbauld, Mary Robinson and Amelia Opie, through novels, poetry and overtly political writings, also made serious contributions to the general discussion about the current turbulence of world affairs.

By the late eighteenth century, it was becoming increasingly acceptable, if still far from easy, for women to publish their writings

¹² For instance, Catharine Macaulay's pamphlet, *An address to the people of England, Scotland and Ireland, on the present alarming crisis of affairs* (1775), is the only publication by a woman mentioned by James E Bradley in his *Popular politics and the American Revolution in England: petitions, the crown and public opinion* (Macon, Georgia, 1986).

¹³ Hannah More, *The cheap repository tracts* (London, 1795-98); idem., *Remarks on the speech of M Dupont* (London, 1793); Mary Wollstonecraft, *Letter on the present character of the French nation* (London, 1793); idem., *An historical and moral view of the origin and progress of the French Revolution; and the effect it has produced in Europe* (London, 1794).

on matters of religion, morality and education, as well as novels and poetry.¹⁴ Mary Poovey suggests three factors which advanced their progress: the demise of literary patronage after 1740, which made anonymous publication possible; the appearance of the 'Bluestockings', who included Hannah More among their number, and who became role models, preserving their moral reputations untainted while simultaneously publishing for profit; and the trend towards philosophical empiricism and 'sentimentalism', emphasizing individual feelings, imagery and observation, a style of writing to which women were thought to be particularly suited.¹⁵ The involvement of a small but significant number of women in the printed debate on the war in the 1790s should therefore be seen in the context of an increasing body of female writers in Britain; yet the clear political content of this polemic marks out their participation in it as a more radical step. These women believed themselves to be at liberty to comment publicly on the 'male' question of war and peace. It was also set in the contexts both of increasing political activity among both men and women of the middle classes and of the turbulent climate induced by the war.

Unsurprisingly, most women were convinced that war was, in general, an evil which ought to be avoided if at all possible; they were also, however, generally imbued with the same Francophobia as characterized the average British male in this period. Ward Hellstrom and Warren Roberts have detected a markedly Gallophobic bias in Jane Austen's novels, particularly through her characterization of certain individuals (Wickham in *Pride and prejudice*, the Crawfords in *Mansfield Park* and Frank Churchill in *Emma*, for example) with classic 'French' personality traits, such as frivolity, urbanity, polish, moral carelessness, deviousness and

¹⁴ For women writers in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, some of whom managed to support themselves financially by their writing, see Anne Laurence, *Women in England 1500-1760: a social history* (London, 1994), 172-6.

¹⁵ Poovey, *The proper lady and the woman writer*, 35-8. See also Bridget Hill, *The republican virago: the life and times of Catharine Macaulay, historian* (Oxford, 1992), 130-148.

wilfulness, as opposed to the plain 'English' virtues of her heroes and heroines.¹⁶ *The Lady's Magazine* continued to carry reports on the fashions current in Paris whenever it could, despite the war;¹⁷ but women were part of a population which by and large supported its government in the conflict against the French Republic. Mrs Jane Webb of Plymouth, anxious to prove the loyalty of the great majority of the whole British population, female as well as male, wrote:

...all ranks of people, with a spirit becoming Britons, are arming for our internal defence...may we not say the whole kingdom is the school of Mars; the ladies are zealous, and in many places have presented those newly-raised corps with colours.¹⁸

Hester Piozzi, as so often, colourfully captured the ambivalent attitude of many: 'The Times are sadly out of Joynt indeed, the War ruinous, & Peace a peril that I hope we shall be spared; for as things now stand We have a Right to keep French men from our Island by Alien Bills &c.'¹⁹

Some, such as Hannah More, were quite convinced of the justice of the war. In what war, she asked, 'can the sincere Christian ever

¹⁶ Ward Hellstrom, 'Francophobia in Emma', *Studies in English Literature*, v (1965), 607-17; Warren Roberts, *Jane Austen and the French Revolution* (London and Basingstoke, 1979), 31-42. See also Marilyn Butler, *Jane Austen and the war of ideas* (Oxford, 1974). A particularly explicit example occurs in *Emma* (London, Folio Society, 1975), 122, where Knightley speaks; 'No, Emma, your amiable young man can be amiable only in French, not in English. He may be very "amiable", have very good manners, and be very agreeable; but he can have no English delicacy towards the feelings of other people: nothing really amiable about him.'

¹⁷ See the issues for May and October 1798 (vol.29), June, September, November and December 1799 (vol.30).

¹⁸ Mrs Jane Webb, *A letter to His Grace the Duke of Portland, on the late alarming parties in the country, by Mrs Webb* (Plymouth, 1795), 12-13. I am grateful to David Wilkinson for this reference.

¹⁹ Katherine C Balderstone (ed.), *Thraliana. The diary of Mrs Hester Lynch Thrale (later Mrs Piozzi) 1776-1809* (2nd edition, 2 vols., Oxford, 1951), ii, 904-5.

have stronger inducements, and more reasonable encouragement to pray for the success of his country, than in this?' It was a war fought not for revenge or conquest, but for the defence of Britain's king, constitution, religion, laws and liberty ('in the sound, sober, and rational sense of that term').²⁰ British aims in the hostilities, according to most pro-war literature, were clearly the protection of British blessings; some women followed a more Burkean, crusading line and were, like More, of the opinion that Britain's best, and perhaps only, security lay in the utter destruction of the Revolution and its doctrines and the restoration of the monarchy in France.²¹

Other women, however, continued to support the French Revolution and therefore opposed the British war against France. Because of the increasing diffusion of the knowledge and understanding of political principles, Mary Wollstonecraft believed that it was possible to be confident of an approaching era of peace and reason, in which war would be abandoned as irrational and brutish.²² The arguments used by female anti-war pamphleteers mirrored those of their male counterparts, although they were more likely to condemn *all* war as futile and immoral, as well as the present war as unjust and unnecessary. Wollstonecraft condemned war as an adventure pursued by the idle rich.²³ The Dissenting writer Mrs Barbauld insisted that the language of 'natural enemies' was absurd, 'as if nature, and not our own broad passions, made us enemies...and yet this language is heard in a Christian country, and these detestable maxims veil themselves under the semblance of virtue and public spirit.' People ought to think less about glorious

²⁰ Hannah More, *Remarks on the speech of M Dupont, with a prefatory address on behalf of the French emigrant clergy* (1793), in *Works* (3 vols. London, 1847), ii, 407.

²¹ See, for example, Mrs Piozzi in Balderston (ed.), *Thraliana*, ii, 932 and Miss Patterson's speech to the Poplar and Blackwell Volunteers as reported by *The Times*, 6 June 1799.

²² Mary Wollstonecraft, *An historical and moral view of the origin and progress of the French Revolution; and the effect it has produced in Europe* (1794), in Janet Todd and Marilyn Butler (eds.), *The works of Mary Wollstonecraft* (7 vols., London, 1989), vi, 17.

²³ *Ibid.*, 23.

heroes returning home and more about the maimed, the bereaved, the orphaned, the mental agonies of war and the ravages it inflicted upon countries (of which Britain, geographically isolated from the Continent, was complacently ignorant).²⁴

In discussing the nature of the war, women writers were often accused of 'emotionalism' in their writing. It is true that they often vented their personal emotional responses to the Revolution itself. They were particularly fixated by French atrocities and the sufferings of individuals; whereas male writers, by and large, wrote about these only for a purpose, chiefly that of inspiring loyalty to the British government through fear, female writers and readers seemed to be genuinely transfixed by them. Many women were deeply affected by the trial and execution of Louis XVI,²⁵ but it was not only the sufferings of royalty which fascinated women, or were thought to fascinate them. *The Lady's Magazine* carried such items as 'The Dying Soldier; a Fragment' and 'Verses from the French; written by a French Prisoner, as he was Preparing to go to the Guillotine'.²⁶

It is not necessary, however, to see all subjective female writing about the Revolution as warm-hearted romanticism. Virginia Sapiro argues that Wollstonecraft's heated style in her *Vindication of the*

²⁴ [Mrs Barbauld], *Sins of government, sins of the nation; or, a discourse for the fast, appointed on April 19, 1793. By a volunteer* (2nd edition, London, 1793), 22-4, 28-30.

²⁵ See, for example, Ralph M Wardle (ed.), *The collected letters of Mary Wollstonecraft* (New York and London, 1979), 227, Wollstonecraft to Joseph Johnston, 26 December 1792; also poems written by Mary Robinson, Charlotte Smith and Eliza Daye for *The European Magazine*, *The Scots Magazine*, *The Universal Magazine* and *The Gentleman's Magazine*, printed in Betty T Bennett (ed.), *British war poetry in the age of romanticism: 1793-1815* (New York and London, 1976), 74-6, 81-2, 91-4. On the general British interest in the trial and execution of Louis XVI, see David Bindman, *The shadow of the guillotine: Britain and the French Revolution* (London, 1989), especially 21-24, 47-54 and plates 88-122.

²⁶ *The Lady's Magazine*, 29 (July 1798), 325, 328. See also Gayle Trusdel Pendleton, 'English Conservative Propaganda During the French Revolution, 1789-1802', unpublished PhD thesis (Emory University), 216.

rights of men (1791) was all part of her response to Edmund Burke, who had himself written in a subjective and often violently colourful style. Wollstonecraft was simply replying in kind or, perhaps, even criticizing his method by parody rather than responding to the substance of his argument.²⁷ Furthermore, when women wrote 'sentimentally' about the Revolution or the war, it was often because, for various reasons, they elevated the private aspects of events over the public. Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the rights of woman* was, on one level, a call for radical political thought to be extended beyond public politics of government institutions into the private politics of the home.²⁸ Women writers acknowledged this female prioritization of the private: the heroine of Helen Maria Williams's little tale, *Madeleine and Auguste* (1792), perceived the chief implication of the Revolution's liberation of all Frenchmen to be that every Frenchman must surely be free to marry the woman he loved. The lady of the house in Charlotte Smith's novel, *The banished man* (1794), was able to talk about politics, but she chose not to be interested in them except insofar as they could advance her own family members.²⁹

A preoccupation with individual public figures was a natural by-product of this concern for the personal in female writing and opinions. Lady Wallace was clearly fascinated by General Dumourier - 'this wonderful little hero' - while Helen Maria Williams was infatuated with Napoleon, 'the benefactor of his race'.³⁰ Other women were more fascinated by what they believed

²⁷ Sapiro, *A vindication of political virtue*, 191-202.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 28.

²⁹ Helen Maria Williams, *Letters from France: containing many new anecdotes relative to the French Revolution, and the present state of French manners* (2nd edition: London, 1792), 174-5; Charlotte Smith, *The banished man* (4 vols., London, 1794), ii, 110-1. See also Earl of Bessborough (ed.), *Georgiana. Extracts from the correspondence of Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire* (London, 1955), 208, the Duchess of Devonshire to her mother, 2 July [1794].

³⁰ Lady Eglantine Wallace, *The conduct of the King of Prussia and General Dumourier investigated by Lady Wallace* (London, 1793), 125; Helen Maria Williams, *A tour in Switzerland, or a view of the present state of the governments*

to be the Corsican general's ferocity and brutality, and with what particulars of his early history and present lifestyle they could glean from the press. Mrs Piozzi was vehement, viewing the name 'Napoleon' as a corrupted form of the word 'Apollyon', which means 'Destroyer': the apocalyptic name for the devil.³¹ The superhero for pro-war writers was Horatio Nelson, particularly after his victory over the French fleet at the Nile in 1798. *The Lady's Magazine* published a biographical sketch of the admiral, together with 'an elegant Engraving' of his ship engaging two larger Spanish ships off Cape St Vincent in 1797.³² He became a focus for the cult of heroism which had grown among women in particular in Britain over the preceding five years, though this was adulation at a distance. Nearer at hand, as Jane Austen noticed, in *Pride and Prejudice*, were those soldiers barracked around the country, parading in their fine uniforms and attracting much female attention - another way, personal and small-scale, in which women could involve themselves in a society at war. Austen did not describe this situation with approval, however - rather, in Lydia Bennet's downfall, she showed what could happen as a result of billeting soldiers among the civilian population.³³

Aside from the personal inclination of some women writers to focus on the private and particular at the expense of the public and the general, this tendency was entirely in keeping with the views of late eighteenth-century society on what women ought to be interested in. It was deliberately encouraged, as Mary Poovey shows, by the male editors and journalists of women's literature. Literature addressed to women laid much less emphasis on reporting facts than

and manners of those Cantons, with comparative sketches of the present state of Paris (2 vols.: London, 1798), ii, 56-7.

³¹ Hester Lynch Piozzi, *Retrospection: or a view of the most striking and important events, characters, situations and their consequences, which the last eighteen hundred years have presented to the view of mankind* (2 vols.: London, 1801), ii, 523-4. See Revelation 9: 11.

³² *The Lady's Magazine*, 29 (November 1798), 483-5.

³³ Colley, *Britons*, 256-7; Roberts, *Jane Austen*, 96. See also BMC 9315, Rowlandson, 'She Will Be a Soldier' (1 May 1798); *ibid.*, 9316, Rowlandson, 'Soldiers Recruiting' (1 August 1798).

that directed to men and was of a much more emotional or moralizing strain. 'The implicit assumption', as Poovey notes, 'is that women's quick passions will be more effectively engaged by such formulations'; they were expected to be more emotionally than intellectually responsive.³⁴ Women were not supposed to be concerned with public affairs, and their emphasis on the personal, private side of public events may well have been the valve they used in order to be able to comment on the war at all.³⁵ Some clearly felt this constraint more than others - radicals such as Wollstonecraft and Williams felt no shame in commenting freely on the war; the conservative Austen and Burney were much more restrained, but this does not mean that they were unaware of the public arena of political events or unable to express opinions about it, as Austen showed in her subtle comment on the government policy creating military barracks.

Women writers also tended to develop moralistic standpoints on the war and on their place in it, again articulating views on a political subject in an acceptably female mode.³⁶ They frequently rejected as arrogant and unjustified the notion that Britain was a favoured nation. Britain was not so pure, wrote Mrs Barbauld austere,ly, that it could afford to see itself as an instrument of divine justice. Its trade in African slaves and its conquests in India were crimes at least as heinous as any France had committed, and it had wilfully encouraged the aggression of the European states towards one another. Fanny Burney agreed. 'We are too apt to consider ourselves rather as a distinct race of beings', she told readers of her *Brief reflections*, recognizing that English chauvinism was a major obstacle to helping the *émigrés*.³⁷ Miss Berry disliked her enforced

³⁴ Poovey, *The proper lady and the woman writer*, 16-19.

³⁵ Roberts, *Jane Austen*, 105.

³⁶ Colley, *Britons*, 277, 280.

³⁷ [Mrs Barbauld], *Reasons for national penitence, recommended for the fast, appointed February XXVIII, 1794* (London, 1794), 16, 4; [idem.], *Sins of government*, 25; Fanny Burney (D'Arblay), *Brief reflections relative to the emigrant French clergy: earnestly submitted to the humane consideration of the ladies of Great Britain* (London, 1793), 12.

wartime restriction to Britain and the insularity of her countrymen: 'All the other cities, and courts, and great men of the world *may* be very good sort of places and of people, for aught we know or care; except they are coming to invade us, we think no more of them than of the inhabitants of another planet.'³⁸

Conservative female writers were particularly anxious about the domestic troubles, potential and actual, created by the war. 'John Bull is a fine Fellow', claimed Mrs Piozzi, 'but if not well *fed* he will *roar*.'³⁹ She disapproved both of measures taken by the rich that were guaranteed to irritate the poor (such as the closure of the London brewhouses in 1795) and measures taken by the poor to redress their grievances against the rich (such as the handbill posted on church doors in Streatham '*demanding*, not *requesting* Relief for the lower Orders').⁴⁰ Hannah More's pamphlet, *Remarks on the speech of M Dupont* (1793), made the connection between atheism and radical politics: 'it is much to be suspected, that certain opinions in politics have a tendency to lead to certain opinions in religion.'⁴¹ Mrs Piozzi also saw the war in a fundamentally religious light, but hers was a much more apocalyptic vision. Distinguishing first from second causes, she perceived the first, cosmic cause of the French Revolution to have been the turbulence which is the preparation for Antichrist. In May 1795 she noted in her journal:

a complete Famine, and three raging Factions are now devouring Paris, Poland is become a mere Desert deluged with blood, Insurrections in Rome and Naples threat those unhappy States with calling in the French directly, whilst Russia & the Porte prepare for instant war. - And is not

³⁸ Lady Theresa Lewis (ed.), *Extracts of the journals and correspondence of Miss Berry from the year 1783 to 1852* (3 vols., 1865), ii, 70, Miss Berry to Mr Greatehead, 2 August 1798.

³⁹ Balderstone (ed.), *Thraliana*, ii, 842.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, ii, 920, 909; Oswald G Knapp (ed.), *The intimate letters of Hester Piozzi and Penelope Pennington 1788-1821* (London, 1914), 180, Mrs Piozzi to Mrs Pennington, 21 August 1799.

⁴¹ More, *Remarks on the speech of M. Dupont*, 402, 405-6.

the End of all to be expected? What other Signs would this adulterous Generation have?⁴²

Female writers, whether conservative or radical, Anglican or Dissenting, agreed in urging moral vigilance on the nation, since they believed that the war ought to be viewed in a religious light; that Britain had no great cause for complacency concerning its own standing with heaven; and above all, that it was highly desirable from the point of view of domestic social order. The reform of political grievances, Hannah More insisted, would be insufficient to render the British 'a happy people'; for that, a reformation of manners would be necessary. Mrs Jane West, in her *Tale of the times* (1799), wrote approvingly of contemporary moral instructors who 'would not ascribe the annihilation of thrones and altars to the arms of France, but to those principles [such as the French sanctioning of divorce] which, by dissolving domestic confidence, and undermining private worth, paved the way for universal confusion.'⁴³ Helen Maria Williams was horrified by tales of atrocities perpetrated by British officers upon Italian patriot prisoners of war, which she felt to be a great stain on British honour.⁴⁴ So depressed was Mrs Piozzi about the moral state of the nation that, in 1800, she told her friend Mrs Pennington that the government 'must leave off appointing such solemnities' as national fasts, since 'the time is over when they did any good.' Mrs Barbauld, whose pamphlets of 1793 and 1794 were written especially for national Fast Days, was also caustic in her denunciation of their use. 'We cannot subsidize the Deity, as we have subsidized his majesty of Sardinia', she warned.⁴⁵

⁴² Balderston (ed.), *Thraliana*, ii, 929.

⁴³ More, *Remarks on the speech of M. Dupont*, 391; West, quoted in Butler, *Jane Austen and the war of ideas*, 105.

⁴⁴ Helen Maria Williams, *Sketches of the state of manners and opinions in the French republic, towards the close of the eighteenth century. In a series of letters* (2 vols., London, 1801), i, 198.

⁴⁵ Knapp (ed.), *Letters to Mrs Pennington*, 188, Mrs Piozzi to Mrs Pennington, [April 1800]; [Barbauld], *Sins of government*, 7-9, 30-3.

Women writers did not often comment on the actual conduct of the war. Mrs Piozzi, Miss Berry and Helen Maria Williams were the most interested in its events and in the conduct of British strategy, but they did not often offer sustained examination of these aspects of the conflict. Miss Berry, who was as well informed, however, as any private individual, male or female, was frequently scathing of the government's strategy in the United Provinces. 'How Holland is now to be saved I do not see', she wrote to Horace Walpole on 28 September 1794; 'and how we are to be safe when it is gone, I as little see; and how and why the D. of York stays to have half his army destroyed, and the other half driven home, I still less see.' 'I have long been perfectly convinced', she later wrote, 'by several circumstances that have come to my knowledge, of the entire and disgraceful ignorance of our Ministers as to foreign politics.'⁴⁶

Fears of invasion, however, were often expressed. Mrs Piozzi wrote a short *Address to the females of Great Britain* and translated General Dumourier's pamphlet, *Tableau spéculatif de l'Europe* (1798), to raise the invasion alarm among the apparently complacent upper ranks of British society: by then, she thought that 'Invasion was a fear no longer fashionable', and when the Irish rebellion erupted later that year, she saw it as a severe mortification of British vanity.⁴⁷ Fanny Burney was not one of those who were sanguine about the prospect of an invasion. Her beloved sister, Susannah, had moved to Ireland with her husband in 1796, and since the threat to Ireland was always greater in the 1790s than that to England, Burney was continually anxious for her sister's safety.⁴⁸

Female writers also suggested ways in which British women could contribute to the war effort. They especially instructed each

⁴⁶ Lewis (ed.), *Berry correspondence*, i, 441, Miss Berry to the Earl of Oxford, 28 September 1794; *ibid.*, ii, 102, Miss Berry to Mrs Cholmeley, 28 October 1799.

⁴⁷ William McCarthy, *Hester Thrale Piozzi: portrait of a literary woman* (Chapel Hill and London, 1985), 229; Piozzi, *Retrospection*, ii, 527.

⁴⁸ See, for example, Joyce M Hemlow (ed.), *The journals and letters of Fanny Burney* (12 vols., Oxford, 1972-1984), iii, 273, Fanny Burney to Mrs Phillips, 10 February [1797].

other to contribute good domestic management and, thus, money to the British war effort. Hannah More's *Remarks on the speech of M. Dupont* was prefaced by an 'Address in Behalf of the French Emigrant Clergy' which was particularly directed at a female audience, urging them to make small retrenchments in their domestic economy and especially in their own fashion expenses in order to be able to give more to this cause. Fanny Burney admitted that charitable giving was not an exclusively female virtue, but she argued that women's demands on their own money were less serious and pressing than those of men, and that their response to her appeal might therefore be swifter and more general.⁴⁹ Neither conservative nor radical female writers, however, advocated the idea of female soldiers. While More wanted to 'prevail on beauty, and rank, and talents, and virtue, confederating their several powers, to exert themselves with a patriotism at once firm and feminine, for the general good', this was intended only in the sense of moral influence, for she immediately went on to insist that she was not 'sounding an alarm for female warriors, or exciting female politicians', for she hardly knew which of the two was 'the most disgusting and unnatural character.' Wollstonecraft might well have wanted to see female politicians - she certainly wanted women to study politics and to have a greater involvement in it - but she insisted that while she wished to see 'the bayonet converted into a pruning-hook', she would not advise women to 'turn their distaff into a musket'.⁵⁰

Colley has suggested that 'in the wars against Revolutionary and Napoleonic France, as in so many later conflicts, British women seem....to have been no more markedly pacifist than men', despite the assumptions of history.⁵¹ This may have been true in terms of their practical support for the war, but the expression of a desire for peace was a characteristically female emphasis. Men might stand to

⁴⁹ More, *Remarks on the speech of M. Dupont*, 377-80; Burney, *Brief reflections*, 7.

⁵⁰ More, *Strictures on the modern system of female education* (London, 1799), in *Works* (3 vols., London, 1847), iii, 14; Mary Wollstonecraft, *A vindication of the rights of woman* (1792; London, Everyman, 1985), 160, 162.

⁵¹ Colley, *Britons*, 262.

gain from war - professional soldiers and sailors, armaments manufacturers, cloth and leather manufacturers, shipbuilders and contractors. These interests might benefit women indirectly, too, but female writers seem to have been more influenced by thoughts of the darker side of war and its adverse consequences for individuals and families, or at least to have felt more able than men to admit to such influences. Mrs Piozzi endorsed this view. 'Female politicians', she wrote, 'confide in negotiation. Elizabeth of England, Isabella of Spain, hated war, and took every possible method to avoid it; while Queen Anne's natural ardour to conclude the peace of Utrecht cost her almost her life.'⁵² Hannah More, for all her conviction of the justice of the conflict on Britain's part, was weary of it by 1797: 'I say nothing of war, because I am weary of the word, nor of peace, because I lose all hope of it.'⁵³ Songs and poems lamenting the miseries of war and sighing for peace were common, such as the sonnets to peace and war published in *The Lady's Magazine* of 1799.⁵⁴ These were not always simple diatribes against the horrors of conflict. Amelia Alderson's *Ode, written on the opening of the last campaign* (1795), might be described as a pragmatic cry for peace. Preferring an immediate cessation of hostilities, but recognizing that this call was unlikely to be heard on its own merits, the poem prays not only for immediate peace but also for victory against France in the coming campaign, in the hope that this may hasten peace.⁵⁵

Mrs Piozzi did have doubts about the eventual peace settlement at Amiens. Admitting that, like everyone else in Britain, she was glad of the peace for material reasons, she nevertheless deplored what to her was a peace bought for the indulgence of British avarice and which allowed the French to reorganize the map of Europe and persuaded Britain to abandon its allies to their fates. Georgiana,

⁵² McCarthy, *Hester Thrale Piozzi*, 221.

⁵³ R Brimley Johnson (ed.), *The letters of Hannah More* (London, 1925), 132, Hannah More to Mrs Boscawen, 1797. See also Lewis (ed.), *Berry correspondence*, ii, 110-1, Miss Berry to Mrs Cholmeley, 2 January 1800.

⁵⁴ Vol.30, 40, 88.

⁵⁵ See Bennett (ed.), *British war poetry*, 137-8.

Duchess of Devonshire, was much more sanguine and perhaps more typical: 'Peace! Peace! Peace!...I must rejoice in spite of all the alarmist long faces.'⁵⁶

Female writers of all viewpoints, therefore, stressed the moral, religious, personal and domestic aspects of the conflict, emphases consistent with the accepted private or 'female' sphere of writing. It was the fact that they were discussing the public, political issue of the war, however conformably to the female sphere, which was new and which provoked disapproval from male readers and discomfort among the female writers themselves. In discussing women's role during the conflict, female writers often acquiesced in the notion of separate spheres for men and women, particularly since warfare was such an overwhelmingly male-dominated activity. In this arena above all, a woman's sphere was almost wholly confined to the private, the domestic and the small-scale - the public arena, the acknowledged sphere of the significant and the substantial, was for men. 'Till Amazonian virtue is again the fashion, we shew better in peace than in war, at home, in our closet or our nursery, than in the field of battle', admonished Laetitia Hawkins.⁵⁷

Other female writers struggled more than Hawkins appeared to with the question of their commenting on the war. In the heat of the invasion crisis of 1798, Hester Piozzi's *Address to the females of Great Britain* appealed to women to cease behaving like children and statuettes in such a crisis as the present struggle against France:

Nobody hinders [women] from being wise or strong, Learned or brace; nor does any one ... pretend to like them better for being weak, ignorant or pusillanimous. You are therefore ... called upon, to act rationally, & steadily: & to maintain that Place among reasonable Beings we have so often heard you urge a Claim to.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Balderston (ed.), *Thraliana*, ii, 1030-1; Bessborough (ed.), *Georgiana Corr.*, 248, the Duchess of Devonshire to her mother, [31 March 1802].

⁵⁷ Hawkins, *Letters on the female mind*, i, 118.

⁵⁸ Quoted in McCarthy, *Hester Thrale Piozzi*, 234.

Yet she elsewhere claimed that she was 'no Politician ... nor either think much or care about public Concerns'. She had learned, as William McCarthy comments, to dissemble her 'unfeminine' interest in politics.⁵⁹ In fact, she worried that she had learned to camouflage it too well: of her *British synonymy* (1794), which used political affairs to illustrate many of its definitions, she wrote, 'I am only afraid the title may prove a millstone round its neck: no one will think of looking for Politics in a volume entitled *British synonymy*.'⁶⁰ It was a typically female way of expressing political opinion - subtly rather than overtly - but the fact remained that to express political opinion publicly was not at all a typically female thing to do.

Fanny Burney protested against a female involvement in public political debate. She told Princess Mary that she had deliberately left political ideas out of her novel, *Camilla* (1796), because 'they were not a *feminine* subject for discussion' as well as because she believed that steering her readers clear of politics altogether was doing them a better service even than inculcating them with her own conservative ideas on the subject. She also thought it necessary to preface her *Reflections on the emigrant French clergy* (1793) with an 'Apology' to justify the entry of a woman into public affairs on the grounds of 'tenderness and humanity'. Yet enter that arena she did: indeed, that very preface went on to argue that while it was generally right for women to remain in the background, on this occasion it was more proper for them to come forward to offer their help to the *émigrés*.⁶¹ Likewise, Hannah More felt compelled to defend her entry into political polemics: at the beginning of her preface to her *Remarks on M. Dupont's speech*, she too justified her boldness by the emergency facing the country. Throughout the pamphlet, however, she claimed not to be 'entering far into any

⁵⁹ Quoted in *ibid.*, 210.

⁶⁰ Knapp (ed.), *Letters to Mrs Pennington*, 101, Mrs Piozzi to Mrs Pennington, 2 December 1793.

⁶¹ Burney, *Brief reflections*, iv-v; Katharine M Rogers, *Frances Burney. The world of female difficulties* (New York and London, 1990), 4.

political principles'.⁶² It is true that her conservative case was specifically based on religious principles, but it was just as clearly extended to be applied to political submission and loyalty. She also actively encouraged the distribution of conservative propaganda, and she wrote a great many of the famous *Cheap repository tracts* herself. Helen Maria Williams wrote self-deprecatingly of her former ignorance of and lack of interest in public affairs, but explained that she had been stimulated to write by her 'love of the French revolution'.⁶³

All these women were in some way claiming that the extraordinary nature of the present times justified their self-directed extension of the female sphere of influence from the private and the domestic into the public and the political. It was true that it was professedly the extremity of threatened revolution in Britain and actual warfare with France which drew them into public activity and permitted their acceptance in this role by society, and that the implication (doubtless often sincerely meant) was that after the return of peace and domestic order, they would shrink back into their traditional place in the national wallpaper. Yet even though they had dressed their political views in 'feminine' and often apologetic moral and religious clothing, a precedent had been created, an erosion encouraged: in the nineteenth century women continue to debate, campaign and publish their views on social and political issues. They participated, for instance, in the movements for the reformation of manners and the Chartists' aims, and against slavery, Catholic-emancipation and the Corn Laws in the first half of the nineteenth century.

⁶² More, *Remarks on the speech of M. Dupont*, 407.

⁶³ Helen Maria Williams, *Letters written in France, in the Summer of 1790, to a friend in England: containing various anecdotes relative to the French Revolution; and memoirs of Mons. and Madame du F* (3rd edition; London 1792), 108.

II

What did British men think about women's involvement in the wars against revolutionary France? Of those who expressed any opinion at all, some simply used gender to characterize different attitudes to the war and to incite men to particular responses; some saw a passive role for women in the war effort; others were willing to allow them, or even demand from them, a more active participation; and various tactics were employed to steer women towards perceiving their war role in particular ways. To some extent, since war had always been a male-dominated phenomenon, the use of gender identities in war-rhetoric was not new; but because women were participating in and against the war effort and in the war debate to a greater extent than in previous conflicts, gender was used more frequently in public rhetoric on engagement in the war and also discussed more frequently as a current issue.

The concept of woman as weak and helpless, physically, mentally and emotionally, was used to denigrate different responses to the war. Both pro-war and anti-war writers dubbed their opponents' position as effeminate and, by implication, unworthy. Dennis O'Bryen charged the government with a 'feminine' cowardice, in resorting to slander against France rather than relying in a 'manly' way solely on the military force of the nation, pitted against that of France. It boded ill, he pointed out, for the success of peace negotiations that the British government and its hirelings should continue to insult and vilify the power it could not conquer.⁶⁴ It was more usual, however, for war to be represented as virile and peace as effeminate. *Reasons against national despondency* was a pamphlet written in reply to Thomas Erskine's anti-war tract, *A view of the causes and consequences of the present war against France* (1797). Its author scornfully dismissed peace-campaigning

⁶⁴ Dennis O'Bryen, *Utrum Horum? The government; or, the country?* (5th edition; London, 1796), 29-31. See also Vicesimus Knox, 'The Prospect of Perpetual and Universal Peace to be Established on the Principles of Christian Philanthropy' (London, 1793), in *Works* (7 vols., London, 1824), v, 353.

malice', for female modesty was 'the last barrier of civilized society'.⁷⁰

Colley notes that the chastity of women was taken particularly seriously by propagandists in this war against revolutionary France because it was a way of scoring points against the enemy, whose women, it was suggested, were somewhat less than chaste.⁷¹ The role of women as childbearers was naturally exalted in time of war, when the size and health of the population was a particularly significant issue. For centuries, however, anxieties had been voiced concerning the possibility of wives tainting their husbands' lines of inheritance by marital infidelity.⁷² This explains why, in the war-time prints and literature which depicted women as potential victims of Frenchmen, their treatment was highly ambivalent. Some propaganda showed them simply as objects of purity and beauty to be protected and sheltered from the contamination and plundering of the French. Some, however, showed them as unreliable and unscrupulous, revoltingly eager for the attentions of Frenchmen and greedy for the potential material gain involved in these transactions.⁷³ In the second case, the fear was not so much for the violation of women as for the contamination of the British line, and therefore British property and liberty by a French attack.

⁷⁰ John Bowles, *Remarks on modern female manners, as distinguished by indifference to character, and indecency of dress; extracted from 'Reflections political and moral at the conclusion of the war'* (London, 1802), 5, 12.

⁷¹ Colley, *Britons*, 250-3. See, for instance, *Desultory Thoughts on the Atrocious Cruelties of the French Nation: with Observations on the Necessity of War, and a Calm Admonitory Address to all English Jacobins. By a loyal subject to the King and Constitution of Great Britain* (Bath, 1794), 64-6; 'A Word to the Wise', *The Anti-Gallican Songster*, i (London, 1793), 6; Jacques François Mallet du Pan, *Dangers which threaten Europe. Principal causes of the want of success in the late campaign - faults to be shunned and means to be taken to render the present decisive in favour of the real friends of order and peace* (London, 1794), 53.

⁷² Poovey, *The proper lady and the woman writer*, 5-6; Cottrell, 'English Views', 138. See also Fletcher, *Gender, sex and subordination, passim*.

⁷³ See, for example, BMC 9725, Cruikshank, 'Thoughts on the Invasion!' (27 August 1801).

Suitably feminine contributions were good domestic management, the donation of money and tending the sick and wounded.⁷⁴ Another role admitted to women by even the sternest conservatives was that of encouraging their men to fight for their country. 'Job Nott' suggested that women could be 'stirring up young men to be public spirited protectors of their fair country-women', and, he added, 'you can laugh at those who hang back'.⁷⁵ Arthur Young argued that if the influence of British women were thus extended, he was sure that it would send 'thousands with ardour to the standard'.⁷⁶ Men refused, however, to entertain the idea of yielding their traditional prerogative in the defence of the country to women. 'Chamberpot defence' was the most that was generally allowed to women by the cartoonists - beyond that, it was men's work.⁷⁷ 'A hen is a respectable animal when she is feeding or brooding her chickens', 'Thomas Bull' told his cousin 'John', but in a cockpit she is ridiculous.⁷⁸ In 1803 'The Projector' wrote in *The Gentleman's Magazine* of his genuine concern that women were being wasted as a potential military resource and that, were they suitably trained and educated for the task, women might be equal if not superior to men

⁷⁴ The *Sun*, 27 November 1799; *The Times*, 11 March 1795, quoted in Clive Emsley, *British society and the French wars 1793-1815* (London, 1979), 51-2; [Theodore Price], *Further humble advice from Job Nott* (Birmingham, 1800), 5-6; William Cobbett (ed.), *The parliamentary history of England, from the earliest period to the year 1803* (London, 1806-1820), xxxiii, 1455, William Windham, 24 April 1798.

⁷⁵ [Price], *A back to front view*, 6.

⁷⁶ Arthur Young, *National danger and the means of safety* (London, 1797), 30; also published in idem., (ed.), *The annals of agriculture*, xxviii (1797), 184. See also Robert Farren Cheetham, 'Ode for Her Majesty's Birthday', in idem., *Odes and miscellanies* (London, 1796), 108.

⁷⁷ Cottrell, 'English Views', 107. An exception was BMC 8432, [Nixon], 'French Invasion or Brighton in a Bustle' (1 March 1794), which showed old women among others helping to repel the French; but they were included rather to mock the quality of national defence rather than to applaud female involvement in it.

⁷⁸ *A letter to John Bull, esq., from his second cousin Thomas Bull, author of the first and second letters to his brother John* (London, 1793), 35.

as soldiers; but this, of course, remained a highly controversial claim.⁷⁹

Finally, and particularly so in view of all these concerns, female pamphleteering on the issue of the war was also a questionable activity. Some male writers approved heartily of well-known conservative female writers such as Hannah More: 'MISS HANNAH MORE APPEARS to be another Instrument in the hand of Providence to benefit Mankind, and I hope she will go on in her labour for the public good, and not be diverted from her object by the sneers', wrote 'Job Nott'.⁸⁰ Fanny Burney's *Brief reflections relative to the emigrant French* was favourably reviewed in the *British Critic*, the *Monthly Review*, the *Critical Review* and the *European Magazine*.⁸¹ Men were often doubtful of the value or propriety of women publicly airing their views on political subjects, however. Richard Polwhele thought that it had been just tolerable in the past, when they had been few and far between - then, a female writer had been 'esteemed a Phenomenon in Literature' and sure of a favourable reception among the critics simply because she was a woman. Now he thought there were so many of them that they had grown complacent and bold, and they could no longer charm critics by self-deprecating acknowledgements of their own 'comparative imbecility'.⁸² The *Sun* noted on 24 September 1795: 'The Comedy which Mrs Inchbald has ready, we hope to find devoid of all political allusions; and if so, her Muse, we doubt not, will receive and deserve a liberal patronage.' Readers' of *Lady's Magazine* in October 1799 were left in no doubt as to the impropriety of women either participating in the war or commenting publicly on it:

Women were created to be the companions of man, to please him, to solace him in his miseries, to console him in his sorrows, and not to partake with him the fatigues of

⁷⁹ 'The Projector, XXI', in *The Gentleman's Magazine*, ii (1803), 715, quoted in Cottrell, 'English Views', 109-11.

⁸⁰ [Price], *Further humble advice from Job Nott*, 7.

⁸¹ Hemlow (ed.), *Burney journals and letters*, iii, 40 n.2.

⁸² Richard Polwhele, *The unsex'd females; a poem, addressed to the author of the Pursuits of Literature* (New York, 1800; first published 1798), 19-20 n.

war, of the sciences, and of government. Warlike women, learned women, and women who are politicians, equally abandon the circle which nature and institutions have traced round their sex; they convert themselves into men.⁸³

III

Only a minority of women engaged heavily in patriotic or pacific activism, and an even smaller proportion published their views on the war. These naturally reflected their social class and their era in the attitudes they revealed. As McCarthy remarks of one of them: 'To read through Piozzi's political remarks from the 1790s is to encounter again and again sharable sentiments emphatically expressed.'⁸⁴ Yet it is clear that women's writings also had identifiably characteristic concerns and emphases in the issues they discussed. They were generally more concerned with the personal and the private than with the massed and the public. Female writers were universally horrified by the violence and cruelties of warfare and, while they could be as chauvinistically British as male writers, they also more often noticed and rebuked this attitude than did men. Most did not comment much on the British government's conduct of the war, but some of those who did showed themselves to be as well informed as most male observers. Peace was, if anything, an event still more desired by women than by men, whatever their political stance; none seemed to be war-crusaders of the intensity of a Burke or a Windham, ready to sacrifice all possibility of peace until monarchical government was restored in France, however much they might wish for such an outcome.

It is also true to say that it was a war which offered women a substantially greater opportunity to become involved in its issues and activities than any previous conflict had done. This was partly because it was such a long war and involved such a great proportion of the British population. It had a direct impact on ordinary women as well as on professional male soldiers and sailors. This was also a

⁸³ *The Lady's Magazine*, 30 (October, 1799), 450-1.

⁸⁴ McCarthy, *Hester Thrale Piozzi*, 220.

war in which more emphasis was consciously placed on ideological issues than any since the wars of religion and, since the intervening period had seen an escalation both of the press and of literacy and more recently of professional women writers, there was more place for women to become actively involved. Yet the conflict and the British debate over it also reinforced and validated separate agenda for men and women, since those women who ventured to express their opinions publicly, whether in print or otherwise, tended to articulate their views through developing notions of separate spheres and acknowledged their importance.

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