

BENJAMIN DABBY. *Women as Public Moralists: From the Bluestockings to Virginia Woolf*. Royal Historical Society Studies in History, New Series. Rochester: Boydell Press, 2017. Pp. 308. \$90 (cloth).

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Though ours is a secular age, finally women across the globe are being heard on what might be called another moral “Great Scourge,” the sexual harassment of women. Benjamin Dabby’s *Women as Public Moralists in Britain: From the Bluestockings to Virginia Woolf* is therefore a timely work in its recuperation of British and Irish women’s voices from the long nineteenth century. It is also timely in its suggestion that, at its core, abstract philosophy always strives toward the ethical and that, although women were seldom granted the honorific of “sage” in the nineteenth century, both “morality” and intellectualism strongly marked their writerly lineage. To wit: “Close thy Byron; open thy Woolf.”

The “moralists” Dabby analyzes include Anna Jameson, Hannah Lawrance, Eliza Lynn Linton, Beatrice Hastings, George Eliot, Rebecca West, and Virginia Woolf, all successors to the brilliant eighteenth-century Bluestockings, and to Catherine Macaulay and Mary Wollstonecraft’s vaunted belief in education for women. As Dabby points out, though this impressive group of writers disagreed on much, they all argued that women (including themselves) were significant thinkers and actors in public life and essential to England’s historical greatness. For over a century, the combined work of these writers sought to “accrue the cultural authority needed to intervene in public debates about how to foster social progress through individuals’ moral improvement” (2).

Their reasoning was often ingenious. For example, through historicizing England’s evolution from the medieval period, Lawrance insisted that women were, more often than not, “responsible *for* England’s progress” (45; italics added). Moving from the global to the local, Margaret Oliphant wittily stated that individual men received a better education in conversation with women than with their counterparts because women were “more ready and better qualified in many instances” to “take part” in “incursions over the borders of metaphysics” (quoted in Dabby 89).

But to my mind, Dabby’s most original insight is that these writers used patriarchy’s historical hegemony to their advantage: that is, they reasoned that the assumption that men were the rightful leaders of the nation had caused the masculine sex to become “susceptible to pride and vanity” and thus weakened their ability to lead properly (2). At this historical juncture, then, women moralists argued that only they could rhetorically and morally “fulfil a public role without succumbing to male selfishness or female weakness” (33). Their greatest asset in this approach was disinterestedness. Thus, while Jameson redefined femininity “in terms of its objective moral insight,” Woolf opined that women’s strong disinterestedness was the result of centuries of deprivation based on gender (20, 217).

As with all recuperation efforts, Dabby shows how spare previous histories are in understanding women’s significant contributions to the development of the nation state and how the work of women writers often describes a different historical arc based on their own standpoint. While subtly examining the theoretical and rhetorical differences between women moralists, Dabby also sees what makes them part of a distinct and important line of thinkers who insisted on writing women as passive victims out of history and writing them back in as historical, intelligent agents.

Dabby’s recuperation efforts illustrate that history, is, if nothing else, ironic. For example, he finds that the earlier women moralists made it possible for their literary descendants to reject their inheritance. Rebecca West, for instance, resisted being compared with the previous women moralists because she dreamed of the possibility of “gender-neutral cultural prophets” (192). Beatrice Hastings, openly breaking with traditions of all sorts, “promulgated a

sometimes anarchic and invariably countercultural modernist aesthetic which she saw as the only means to a fundamental reimagination of society” (194).

Other ironies are tantalizing and disconcerting at once. Suggesting that there was a more “diverse public discourse” during the long nineteenth century than previously admitted, Dabby notes that patriarchy was only *one among many* discourses competing for attention. Thus, “historians’ acceptance of separate spheres as a lived reality” prevented studying the trajectory of women moralists up until now (11). In particular, second-wave feminist literary scholars “took the ideological power of separate spheres at face value,” thus focusing heavily on how novels by women writers illustrated the anxieties produced by rigid gender construction (8).

But in attempting to draw these writers as strong agents in their time, which is a laudable project, I fear that Dabby may be a bit too sanguine that “the sex” was not “as uniformly oppressed” as thought and that “perceptions of gender in this period were more nuanced than previously understood” (6). These statements are a given and should not be construed as obviating continued study of the material reality of those who did not have the privilege of being writers. Further, nuancing Eliza Lynn Linton into a quasi-feminist seems to require too much heavy lifting. In the chapter on Linton (significantly shorter than other chapters in this admirable volume) Dabby hems and haws about her actual contributions as a disinterested feminist, making one wonder why she is even included. Despite these reservations and my own admittedly “interested” politics, I warrant this an important, interesting, deeply intelligent contribution to the field.

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CLIVE EMSLEY. *Exporting British Policing during the Second World War: Policing Soldiers and Civilians*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017. Pp. 256. \$114.00 (cloth).
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Clive Emsley may be the most eminent historian of British policing today. Thus, readers should welcome his new work on the wartime experience of British policemen called up to, or volunteering to serve in, the (British Army) Corps of Military Police. *Exporting British Policing during the Second World War* complements his recent work on criminality within the British armed forces in the twentieth century, published as *Soldier, Sailor, Beggarman, Thief: Crime in the British Armed Services since 1914* (2013). While about three thousand members of the corps undertook the military equivalent of civilian police work, Emsley’s focus is on the further one thousand military policemen who were members of the detective branch (Special Investigation Branch, or SIB) or of the Civil Affairs Officer (CAO) branch. While the tasks of the five hundred military detectives are self-explanatory, the five hundred men who formed the latter branch were responsible in the first instance for restoring law and order and civilian institutions and governance in liberated or in just-conquered territories. While training courses had commenced as early as January 1940 in order to prepare liaison officers for the British occupation of territory liberated from the Nazis, Emsley notes that the tasks that the members of the SIB and the CAO branch undertook during the war were far beyond the previous peacetime experience of those personnel. For rebuilding administrative and governmental structures and essential services in wartime was scarcely familiar territory for civilian policemen now recruited to wartime Civilian Affairs, while the wartime criminal activities to be tackled by military detectives encompassed conduct such as black-