

Cook, *Epistolary Bodies: Gender and Genre in the Eighteenth-Century Republic of Letters*

(New term—Jurgen Habermas) Public sphere: “conceptual space in which the reasoning individual, abstracted from private interest, arrives at consensus”—enlightenment ideal of the civic space (10); this conceptual space is crafted from our interaction, as reasoning individuals, with each other through exchange, dialogue, debate, conversation, print.

Against simplistic definitions of public/private that have them utterly separate—one the realm of the state, the other of the domestic interior—the public sphere is a product of historically shifting Modes of political authority—paternalistic, to contractualistic

[these shifts in line with other large-scale shifts; marriage as alliance→marriage as companionate contract; aristocratic worldview→middle class world view; predominantly religious→more broadly secular; blood as value→work as value; identity a product less of blood, rank, lineage→ commerce in the world]

Paternalistic mode sees the authority of the monarch as absolute, innate power, reinforcing a natural and immutable hierarchy

Contractualistic mode (social contractualism)—reflects authority as based on consensus; it is contingent, contractual authority, leading to egalitarianism; decenters the paternalistic role. This is the ideal of the “republic,” later in the 18th century [i.e. republic of the French revolution, liberte/egalite/fraternite]

Demise of the paternalistic mode has far-reaching and intertwined consequences—a crucial reconfiguration of the concepts of public and private. Public sphere—primarily signified by print culture, the interaction in publication of rational individuals in debate. I.e., through such interaction, as equals, in the public sphere, consensus is reached—about legislation, about governance, about exchange, and so on. But, the public domain, as Habermas has articulated it, “functionally excludes” [here, distinction between theory and practice] those without legal standing of a particular kind, like women and people of color. Also, the public sphere really only speaks to elements of the civic arena that are “public”—how does it address the new domain of private experience, increasingly important in the 18c? How is that shaped? According to Cook, the domain of private experience increasingly shaped/regulated by stories (15), another part of the public sphere, which is typically overlooked because of the Habermasian elision of other voices. Domestic fiction; the realist-domestic novel of private life (new terms). Letters allow the performance of sociability, the performance of consensus, along another register.

Epistolarity is “ontologically ambiguous”—at once factual and fictional, blurs those lines—it is a sign of authenticity and factual, reasonable debate, but it is also a highly mutable and fictional tool, which can be used to project factuality or to play with issues of factuality and authenticity. A playful, tricky mode.

“18^c epistolary novel played an important part in reconfiguring and redefining these concepts of public and private, for it represents the paradoxical intersection of these apparently opposed orders” (12)

According to Cook, Richardson uses the epistolary form to reaffirm a version of patriarchal authority (28).