

Editor's Introduction

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We begin with an article that continues the theme of issue 44, number 4, about ethnicity, nation, and the meaning of Britain. When John of Gaunt celebrates England as “this sceptred isle” in Shakespeare’s *Richard II*, he may have been referring to England itself as an island separate even from Scotland. In his erudite and fascinating article, “The Meaning of ‘Britain’ in Medieval and Early Modern England,” Alan MacColl argues for the existence of a tradition regarding England as an island going back to the Middle Ages. MacColl shows that the twelfth-century historian Geoffrey of Monmouth conceived of Britain as the whole island, but subsequent writers narrowed down Britain to mean just England, although they sometimes included Wales.¹ In this tradition England and Wales could be seen as an island geographically separate from Scotland, being divided by the firths of Forth and Clyde. In the sixteenth century, this vision of Britain expressed hostility to the Scots as feared and hated interlopers. However, during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries the Scots began to develop a countertradition of Britain as a “larger British polity in which England and Scotland are equal participants” (269). The usefulness of the term “Britain,” as MacColl points out, therefore derived from its ability to cover several different geographical and historical meanings.

We then move on to a special section on “The Public and the Private in the Early Modern Period.” Habermas famously used the term the “public sphere” to describe a modern arena of rational discussion and political openness apart from the state. Its use in the early modern period is somewhat controversial, especially for the revisionist historians who insist that the public sphere was an irrelevant concept in the struggles of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. What mattered were the internal conflicts and maneuverings of the elites, which could only be discerned in manuscript sources. They dismissed printed material as confusing ephemera that masked the real motives of political actors.² In their wide-ranging and stimulating essay, “Rethinking the Public Sphere in Early Modern England,” Peter Lake and Steve Pincus acknowledge that revisionists made some important points about the centrality of the court, religion, and historical contingency, but

¹ On a similar topic in a recent issue, see Paul Dalton, “The Topical Concerns of Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia Regum Britannie*: History, Prophecy, Peacemaking, and English Identity in the Twelfth Century,” *Journal of British Studies* 44, no. 4 (October 2005): 688–712.

² See also an article in our last issue: Derek Hirst, “Making Contact: Petitions and the English Republic,” *Journal of British Studies* 45, no. 1 (January 2006): 26–50.

they insist that print, manuscript news, and other forms of public elite and popular culture had true significance. Lake and Pincus have developed a way of using the terminology of the public sphere that is sensitive to the political, religious, and economic context of the early modern period. Elites, they point out, often leaked, as we would say, information out into the public for their own strategic ends and encouraged Puritan or Catholic propagandists in order to gain leverage in their own struggles. But this post-Reformation public sphere ebbed and flowed according to historical contingencies. Lake and Pincus differentiate between the post-Reformation public sphere and the post-Revolutionary public sphere that emerged after 1688. The later public sphere incorporated discussions of political economy so important in a dynamic and changing society, and it also became a permanent, rather than an episodic, feature of the public landscape.

As a microhistory of the very process of the creation of the public sphere, David Randall's article, "Joseph Mead, Novellante: News, Sociability, and Credibility in Early Stuart England," provides a valuable complement to the sweeping interpretation of Lake and Pincus. Randall illustrates how one man, a gentleman named Joseph Mead, gathered and read information about continental military events and, over the process of several decades, changed the way he approached the news. Initially, the public sphere of news gathering, reading, and discussion was based on private sociability and gentle opinion, according to Randall. Gentlemen obtained and disseminated news through personal networks—either through discussions or through manuscript letters—and judged its credibility according to what they knew of the person who informed them. But over the years Mead became a modern reader of news; in his manuscript news accounts he included printed corantos, the ancestor of today's newspapers, which were often based on anonymous sources. This links nicely to Lake and Pincus's discussion of new ways in which people began to assess the validity of information.

The public and the private are often seen as paired yet opposing concepts. In her article, "Public, Private, and the Household in Early Seventeenth-Century England," Erica Longfellow points out how the meaning of the private, as well as the public, was very different in the early modern period. In the modern period, the private has been associated with the right to privacy, to conduct one's own personal affairs in private without neighbors' nosing in; the private sphere has been thought of as the home and domesticity. Neither of these meanings was very relevant to the early modern period, finds Longfellow. Indeed, the idea that one could conduct one's sexual affairs in private was seen as rather suspicious, a prerogative only for married people. Sexual misdeeds were the concern of the community, which might be burdened with an abandoned wife or an illegitimate child. Furthermore, women's roles were not seen strictly in terms of public and private, for the family household was the locus of economic production and a concern of the community as well. Longfellow illustrates her broad sweep of historical arguments with close readings of diaries and family letters, demonstrating that even activities such as praying in a closet or marital quarrels were seen as relevant to the community, not just the individual.

Clare Midgley's "Can Women Be Missionaries? Envisioning Female Agency in the Early Nineteenth-Century British Empire" also fruitfully challenges assumptions about public and private in women's history. Following the doctrine of separate spheres, it has long been assumed that evangelical missions would not

send out early nineteenth-century women as independent missionaries. Midgley begins her article with the famous scene in *Jane Eyre* in which the heroine refuses to marry St. John Rivers and join him on his missionary travels, because she wanted to become an active missionary agent in her own right—a seeming impossibility at the time, according to historians and literary critics. Building on more recent historical work that demonstrated the important functions of missionary wives, Midgley sensitively shows that a number of early nineteenth-century sources such as periodicals and memoirs of female missionaries represented women as active agents, not merely helpmeets to their husbands. Indeed, one contemporary evangelical work lauded the “importance of female agency in evangelizing pagan nations” (346). To be sure, evangelical women faced obstacles on their path, ranging from obdurate mission organizations and public criticisms to fearful fathers. But Evangelical women were able to assert their agency by claiming a special mission, inaccessible to English men, to convert “heathen” women and by manipulating the “internally contradictory nature of evangelical prescriptions for women” (348).

Our issue concludes with Sarah Cheang’s “Women, Pets, and Imperialism: The British Pekingese Dog and Nostalgia for Old China.” This article is both charming and sophisticated in its cultural analysis of the place of the Pekingese in elite British culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Pekingese dogs first came to Britain when they were allegedly stolen from the imperial palace during the Opium Wars. Upper-class ladies adopted them as fashionable accessories, stressing the importance of their Imperial lineage to bolster their own aristocratic lineage and eugenic concerns. These women evoked the court of the Empress Cixi in a feminine exercise of colonial nostalgia. At the same time, the ladies’ control over the breeding of the Pekingese challenged the male-dominated Kennel Club, which in turn warned against “doggy suffragettes.” Cheang’s article shows how “possession of the most favored dog of a fading Chinese Imperial household was used to signify the victory of Western imperialism in China and also the high social and imperial status of Pekingese dog owners” (386).