

Institution: King's College London
Unit of Assessment: 29 English Language and Literature
Title of case study: Brilliant Women: 18th-century Bluestockings Exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery March-June 2008
<p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>While academic research about 18th-century women writers is well established, many general readers are completely unfamiliar with the range, presence and vitality of their cultural activity. Elizabeth Eger's research on 18th-century women's writing led to a free, public exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery aimed to bridge the distance between specialised and general knowledge by introducing to the general public the original bluestockings— a group of intellectual women who had significant social and literary impact upon Enlightenment Britain but were subsequently written out of history. The exhibition attracted a large audience of over 185,000 people, approximately twice the number predicted by the NPG. 40% of the visitors were first time at the NPG, and an outreach programme ensured this audience was diverse.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>Over a fifteen year period, Elizabeth Eger (appointed 2003) has researched the work of the circle of intellectual 18th-century women known as the Bluestockings. This group of artists, writers and thinkers met regularly in informal salons to discuss contemporary ideas and promote the life of the mind. Eger's study, which began as a doctoral thesis (awarded 1999), draws on sustained analysis of both the substantial archive of published work by Enlightenment women in the fields of educational writing, Shakespeare criticism and poetry, and on unpublished letters and manuscripts. Her work has illuminated the discourses of patronage, conversation, and correspondence that supported the bluestocking literary network. Prior to her appointment at King's, she was editor of the volume <i>Women, Writing and the Public Sphere, 1700-1830</i> (2000) (3.1), which contributed to the definition of new directions in understanding 18th-century women writers and 18th-century culture more widely. She followed this with her 2010 monograph, <i>Bluestockings: Women of Reason from Enlightenment to Romanticism</i> (3.3). Eger's work demonstrates that, contrary to long-held assumptions, women contributed to the key cultural transformations of the 18th century. Moreover, their contributions were celebrated as indicative of Britain's literary identity and only subsequently forgotten. Among the lessons she has drawn is the fact that the history of feminism is not a tale of simple progress – in many ways women were more visible and active in cultural terms during the 18th than the 19th or early 20th century. One inspiration for Eger's research had been Richard Samuel's representation of the Bluestocking circle, the oil painting, 'The Nine Living Muses of Great Britain', exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1779, and which now belongs to the National Portrait Gallery. In 2004, Eger approached the NPG with the idea of an exhibition relating to this painting (which at the time was not on public display), exploring the ways in which 18th-century intellectual women created a public profile for themselves. The topic has contemporary resonance as questions relating to women's status as cultural producers and celebrities are continually debated in the public arena. The exhibition aimed to present an analysis of women's cultural production within its historical context. Working in collaboration with NPG's 18th-century curator, Lucy Peltz, Eger extended her foundational work into the realm of visual culture. Eger and Peltz co-authored a prize-winning monograph (3.2) exploring the rise and fall of the Bluestockings in relation to the social, economic and political history of Britain, through items of material culture, such as satirical prints, keepsakes, literary artefacts, and paintings. Many of the items discussed in the study were displayed in the exhibition.</p> <p>In 2005, Eger and Peltz secured a collaborative doctoral award from AHRC, and appointed Clare Barlow, who started her PhD in King's English department in 2006 on 'Patriotism and Virtue in the Works of Elizabeth Carter and Catherine Macaulay'(awarded 2010) (3.4). Barlow contributed to the research for the exhibition, including her rediscovery of a portrait of Elizabeth Carter as Minerva, held in a private collection in Kent.</p> <p>The exhibition was accompanied by an international conference which brought together leading academics on eighteenth-century women writers and artists. A volume of essays derived from this event, introduced, edited and contributed to by Eger (2013) (3.5).</p>
3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

Impact case study (REF3b)

3.1 **Eger E**, Grant C, Ó Gallchoir C, Warburton P, Eds. *Women Writing and the Public Sphere 1700 – 1830* (Cambridge University Press, 2001). This volume, for which **Eger** co-wrote the introduction and contributed an essay (reviewed as ‘excellent’ in the *TLS*), has been widely cited. The work includes essays by an international range of specialists, demonstrating the full extent of women’s contribution to a public cultural sphere in the 18th century as well as offering a challenge to the critical dominance of the Habermasian account of the 18th-century public sphere. Further responses to the volume include: ‘There is a fund of scholarship here and a depth of engagement which it is impossible to do justice to: for anyone teaching or writing on 18th-century women, this is an essential text’ (*Gender and History*).

3. 2 **Eger E**, Peltz L. *Brilliant Women: 18th-Century Bluestockings* (National Portrait Gallery, 2008, sold c. 6000, and two co-editions: Yale University Press in USA (2000 copies), and Hardie Grant publishers in Australia (500)). Winner of the 2009 Collaborative Project Award, Society for the Study of Early Modern Women (USA). Reviews: ‘The generous conception and abundance of detail in *Brilliant Women*, are, well, brilliant.’ Gina Luria Walker, *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 82, No. 1 (March 2010), pp. 178-180. ‘Brilliant Women is groundbreaking in its linking of the literary, visual, and material culture of the bluestockings.’ Devoney Looser, *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 42.2 (2009): 335-339.

3. 3 **Eger E**. *Bluestockings: Women of Reason from Enlightenment to Romanticism* (Palgrave, 2010) Runner up, 2012 ESSE (European Society for Studies in English) prize for best book in the English Language. Reviews include: ‘**Eger**’s meticulously researched discussion of the bluestockings does much to enrich our understanding of women’s role in Enlightenment and Romantic culture... it will become an essential text for those studying the bluestockings as well as eighteenth-century women writers’ - JoEllen DeLucia, *New Books Online – 19*; ‘**Eger** shows a rich and varied tradition of female-authored Shakespeare criticism’ – *TLS*; ‘**Eger**’s elegantly written study...provides new insights into intellectual women’s culture’ - Susanne Schmid, *Wordsworth Circle*; ‘The standard “full treatment” of Bluestockings, however, is likely from now on to be Elizabeth **Eger**’s elegant book’ - Claude Rawson, *Studies in English Literature* (Summer 2012): 697–741; ‘outstanding’ - Joseph Bristow, *Studies in English Literature* (Autumn 2011): 905–978.

3. 4 **Barlow C**. ‘Eighteenth-Century Women Writers in the Public Eye: Virtue, Patriotism and Publication’. (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of London, 2010). Examined by Amanda Vickery and Karen O’Brien

3.5 **Eger E**, Ed. *Bluestockings Displayed: Portraiture, Performance, and Patronage 1730-1830* (Cambridge University Press, 2013) Reader’s report for Cambridge University Press: ‘a landmark collection, opening up new vistas for further scholarship.’

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

The first aim of the NPG exhibition, initiated by **Eger**, was to disseminate her academic research to a wide public audience, and to explore and extend the social and cultural impact of the original ‘Bluestocking Circle’. Over the 95 days of its lifetime, the exhibition attracted 183,596 people, almost double its target audience of 100,000. The book that accompanied the exhibition sold out and was also published by Yale University Press and Hardie Editions in Australia (3.2).

We identify four strands of impact:

1. **Enriching national heritage** The exhibition contained 50 items relating to the Bluestockings. Alongside some famous paintings these included rarely seen portraits, satirical prints, and personal artefacts of the Bluestocking Circle. It also considered the way a wider range of women, inspired by the model of the bluestockings, created public personae. Portraits of the artist Angelica Kauffman (1741-1807), historian Catharine Macaulay (1731-91) and early ‘feminist’ Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-97), reveal how women used portraiture to advance their work and reputations in a period that begins with the Enlightenment and ends with the onset of the French Revolution. In bringing to light the work of a forgotten group of writers and artists who had prominence in their own day, the exhibition furthered the aims of **Eger**’s scholarship in restoring to the historical record and to public consciousness the work of women who were involved in the central cultural transformations of their time. Several of the items had not been on public display before. Notable in this respect is the portrait of Elizabeth Carter as Minerva, rediscovered by Clare **Barlow**, the student on the collaborative doctoral award tied to the exhibition and funded by the AHRC. See 5.4.3. This attracted considerable press attention. See 5.2.1.

The portrait is now on permanent display in the NPG, where it has received academic attention from a range of perspectives (notably history of science) for the way it challenges preconceptions about norms of female modesty in the period. The exhibition reached a wide public audience, 40% of which were visiting the NPG for the first time. It attracted a primary target audience of traditional art gallery visitors, 63% of whom were female, and 58% over 35; but it also scored well in relation to the NPG's diversity monitoring, with 39% in the 20-34 age group and 14% from ethnic minorities. 41% of the audience were from overseas.

2. Impact on contemporary debates about women's cultural and intellectual status The exhibition highlighted the resonances between women in the 18th century and women in the present day. For this reason, it was sponsored by Blackberry telecommunications, the Managing Director of which, Charmaine Egberry, a young business woman, felt inspired by the model of female networking to be found in the bluestocking salon. In her foreword to the exhibition catalogue Egberry wrote: "Brilliant Women' are women who define a generation, are passionate for a cause, and live their lives according to their own personal rule rather than allowing themselves to be governed by social convention. Research in Motion (RIM - a charity that supports women's advances in technology) is absolutely delighted to be working with the National Portrait Gallery to highlight and profile some truly extraordinary women in this book.' Egberry hailed the bluestockings as an inspirational model for today's young women who work in technology: 'Across the globe there is now the virtual equivalent of thousands of bluestocking salons, where ideas are exchanged and grown. The Blackberry Women and Technology awards, begun in 2005, in many ways reflect the same philosophies that were encapsulated in the eighteenth-century concept of the nine sister Muses as active and creative figures that epitomized the arts and sciences.' To launch the awards, Egberry commissioned Bryan Adams to create a photographic essay examining the concept of a 'modern-day Muse' with a selection of photographs from the project for display at the National Portrait Gallery (see 5.3). The Gallery ran an online and onsite competition to enter a prize draw to win a Blackberry smartphone. Over 3000 visitors entered the competition at the Gallery, and a further 152 entered through the website. NPG also partnered with Agent Provocateur, who featured the exhibition in their monthly e-newsletter (440,000 subscribers), thus helping to reach a younger audience.

The reach of the impact was considerably expanded by extensive press and media coverage. international broadsheet and popular press (*Guardian Saturday Review, Telegraph, Times, Independent, Sunday Express, The Lady, Elle, Vogue, Country Life, Italian Vogue, New York Times*). A double-page spread in the *Daily Telegraph* showed their choice of today's Brilliant Women photographed alongside portraits hanging in the exhibition. The press reviews were largely very positive with the exception of Brian Sewell in the *Evening Standard*. Key broadcast coverage included an exclusive five-part interview series on BBC Radio 4 Woman's Hour. (To hear Eger speak about Elizabeth Montagu, Queen of the Bluestockings, see 5.2.3) Opinion pieces appeared in several national broadsheets, many of which compared the original bluestockings with their modern counterparts. Critics particularly picked upon the themes of women's strategic and pragmatic 'identity management', celebrity, and the status of intellectual achievement - eg: Kathryn Hughes, in the *Telegraph's Stella Magazine*, compared the early 19th-century backlash against bluestocking success with contemporary fear of powerful, professional women. 'Think of the word "bluestocking" and you are likely to conjure up something female, formidable and frumpy—a dingy corner of feminism, the historical equivalent of dungarees. "Brilliant Women", a new show at London's National Portrait Gallery, blows all that away'; or Joan Smith in the *New Statesman*: 'The original "blues" were much more various than this stereotype suggests, and their dilemmas about intellect, fashion and femininity are still with us today. "Brilliant Women" restores them to their rightful place as our foremothers, the missing link in an unbroken chain of female creativity. The struggle for the right to be clever, sexy and feminine is still going on.' (See 5.2)

3. Impact on young women's self-esteem Public outreach events included a Young People's drama-based workshop exploring the exhibitions themes and legacies, led by artist Miranda Lopatkin from Collectives Artistes (May 4, 2009); half-term holiday art workshops (40 parents and children) an adult portrait-painting workshop and a contemporary 'salon' conversation led by Marina Warner (c. 50 people). The photographic artist Marysa Dowling worked with a group of 'brilliant young women' from the City of Westminster *Connexions Young Parents Support Group*. A group of 9 young mothers was encouraged to work creatively in response to the exhibition. Between January and April 2008, each teenage mother developed ideas for a pair of photographic

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portraits; one as a young parent with her child or children and the other as an individual young woman. 88.8% stated the project had increased their interest in photography, 66.6% stated the project had increased their interest in the Gallery's Collection and 100% stated the project had allowed them to be more creative. 88.8% stated the project had helped them feel more confident as young women and mothers (for further details see 5.1.3).

4. Impact on museum curatorial practice As noted above, the painting that launched the whole project was not on public display when **Eger** approached the NPG, and the gallery's management, while supportive, underestimated significantly the prospective audience. In these respects, the exhibition helped demonstrate that 'women's issues' are not (and have never been) a 'minority' interest. Museum professionals considered the exhibition to be innovative in its juxtaposition of a wide variety of works of art, objects, and texts. Following her work on the exhibition as the collaborative doctoral student, **Barlow** was appointed to curatorial jobs at the museum of Dr Johnson's house and at the NPG. Her success in this regard suggests, given that her first degree and MA were in history (not art history), and that her primary PhD supervisor was in English, that the project helped open out conceptions of curatorial work, and that its interdisciplinary methodology will be extended in subsequent work in these institutions. The exhibition has attracted curators to King's to take the MA in 18th-century studies, thus creating an evolving and close relationship between university and museum practice.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

The following reports on the exhibition's performance provide detailed evidence of the social and intellectual impact of the exhibition upon a public audience:

5.1 Institutional Reports

5.1.1- National Portrait Gallery Exhibition report, 2009 (available on request)

5.1.2. Brilliant Women Press Report, 1999 (available on request)

5.1.3 Brilliant Young Women outreach project Report (available on request)

This project aimed to target a new audience for the gallery – teenage mothers of Westminster.

5.1.4 Photographic report (available on request)

5.2 Media Coverage**5.2.1 Weblinks to media coverage of the discovery of Elizabeth Carter's portrait as Minerva**

<http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2008/mar/07/art>

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/7281771.stm>

5.2.2. Newspaper coverage that reflected upon twenty-first century women's position

<http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/commentators/e-jane-dickson-were-all-still-terrified-of-intellectual-women-793171.html>

<http://www.newstatesman.com/arts-and-culture/2008/03/women-montagu-bluestockings>

<http://www.economist.com/node/10875628>;

5.2.3 Radio programme http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/womanshour/05/2008_23_wed.shtml

5.3 Accompanying photographic exhibition of 'modern muses'

<http://www.npg.org.uk/whatson/display/2008/modern-muses-by-bryan-adams.php>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OzDgxFoC1kQ>

5.4 Individual users and beneficiaries

5.4.1 Report from Curator of the Freemasons' Museum, London (uploaded statement)

5.4.2 Interview with **Barlow** in The Independent

<http://www.independent.co.uk/student/postgraduate/postgraduate-study/the-american-dream-why-british-students-are-heading-to-the-new-world-1995500.html>