

Introduction

The Gender of Freedom and Women in Public

Shortly after I married, I began to stumble over words, over a new vocabulary of marriage that suddenly seemed to belong to me, though it was too new to my tongue to feel at home there. Along with the difficulty of pronouncing the words “my husband” as if they were not in quotation marks, I remember experiencing as odd the thought that my relationship with my partner was now a “marriage.” In uttering the exemplary performative statement “I do” we had enacted our marital tie, but this pronouncement had also brought into being a new *thing*—a marriage.¹ I was surprised by precisely the *thingness* of the marriage—its foreign and objectlike character. I mentally prodded and poked at this new thing, rehearsing the terms in which it was often invoked: “How is your marriage?” “Marriage is hard work.” “Their marriage is on the rocks.” What was this thing that we had created? It seemed, to my mind, to have the structure of a black hole: that is, it had a prominent public exterior that announced a mysterious, deeply private, unknowable interior. Our lives had changed little from pre- to post-marriage: we lived in the same apartment where we had lived before, we had the same jobs, the same friends. Yet marriage seemed to erect a state-sponsored wall around us, within which our sexual activities were now, strangely enough, state-sanctioned as well (all those new sheets for wedding presents!). I contracted a profound interest in stories of divorce at this point. I suppose my question was this: at what point can these walls be breached?

Pamela Haag argues that the sphere of privacy—of sexual intimacy—became a central site of modern liberalism at the turn of the twentieth century.² American freedom and citizenship became increasingly defined in terms of the *free* acts occurring in the protected sphere of privacy marked out by heterosexual marriage rather than in terms of the free acts of economic activity occurring in the marketplace that had characterized earlier, classic liberalism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As a nineteenth-century missionary argued, “marriages based on mutual consent and mutual love” embody “the highest ideal in modern America.”³ Mutual consent in marriage thus indexed

the freedom of the American citizen, and the right to be left alone in marriage, elaborated in the twentieth century as the legal doctrine of privacy, confirmed that freedom.⁴ Yet as my own sense of uneasy interpellation into the institution of marriage had made evident, the state's legal demarcation of marriage as a site of privacy and freedom brought a disconcerting structuring force with it. Indeed, as Haag and other critics have made clear, the legal boundaries of the arena of privacy in which freedom takes place are drawn in such a way as to give the state extraordinary power over "private" freedom: the state's historical interdiction of both interracial marriage and homosexuality are glaring instances of this authority.⁵ The freedom granted by liberalism thus involves a structuring force, and it is the claim of this book that gender is one of the key categories through which liberalism scripts the interrelated public and private lives of citizens of the liberal state.

I use the term "liberalism" here not in the contemporary vernacular sense (liberal versus conservative), but with broad reference to the political tradition inaugurated by theorists of the social contract such as John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The innovation of liberal political theory lies in the claim that individuals have the right to exercise political choice or consent (as well as dissent) with respect to governing authority: the freedom, or the fundamental right to *liberty*, ascribed to the individual in this theory defines the politics of liberalism. In ascribing the capacity to consent to the individual, liberalism also, by implication, constructs and relies upon a strong definition of the modern subject as one who is free, autonomous, and capable of self-government and rational behavior. Despite the proclaimed universality of such a subject, women have historically been understood to lack the independence necessary to function as liberal subjects. Since the founding of the U.S. state, women have been overtly excluded from the purview of liberal citizenship in a variety of ways: under the law of "coverture," for instance, married white women had no independent legal standing before the law and were unable to own property (including property in their own bodies and the wages of their own labor) prior to the mid-nineteenth century. The capacity to exercise political consent, in the form of the franchise, was not extended to white women until 1920 and only fitfully to women of color from that point forward. Critics of women's suffrage argued that women would be too subject to the suasion of others (such as their husbands) and thus unable to exercise independent choice in the ballot booth. Legal, political, and cultural definitions of femininity identified women as incapable of acting autonomously, incapable of achieving liberal subjectivity.

Feminist critics have thus argued that liberalism is flawed insofar as it

excludes women.⁶ While it is indeed the case that the figure of the woman within liberalism often stands opposed to the autonomous, white male liberal subject, this book explores the proposition that this opposition is itself crucial to liberal thought and culture. As such, I argue that liberalism does not exclude women so much as it creates and reserves a discrete position for women within its structure. The position marked out for women—particularly white women—within liberalism is private and familial. Yet rather than simply standing as external to liberalism, this private position—and indeed, the entire notion of privacy and private property—must be seen as crucial to the structure and meaning of liberalism. This is why, for instance, sexual intimacy (coded as privacy) comes to be linked to freedom in the twentieth century, as Haag argues. The focus of this book is on the development of liberalism in relation to gender prior to the twentieth century, and I argue that women's private position has been integral to liberalism since its inception. Indeed, liberalism relies heavily on a binary model of sex and gender: liberal doctrine both creates and sustains a rigidified opposition between male and female bodies and subjectivities. Rather than focusing on women's exclusion from liberalism, however, I argue that one can, with a dialectical turn, locate women *within* the broader structure of liberalism, and discern, as well, the way in which liberalism historically helps to create the very meaning of the word "woman" as we know it today. Race, too, assumes a prominent position within this account of liberalism and gender insofar as the figure of the private woman is insistently defined as white.

The association of women with privacy and the domestic sphere is one that has been vigorously contested of late: historians and literary critics alike have demonstrated the lack of clarity of any demarcation between public and private spheres and the extent to which women of all races routinely engaged in public speaking, paid labor, and political endeavor in a variety of historical periods. Yet liberalism, as a political system, insistently draws an ideological distinction between public and private spheres, and gender has historically been a central element of this mapping of space as well. While it may be possible to demonstrate a lack of functional boundaries between public and private roles for both men and women, the ideological organization of liberal social space relies, in both cultural and juridical terms, upon a perceived distinction between public and private spheres. The political philosopher Judith Shklar argues, for instance, that liberalism is based, in its essence, upon an insistent division between public and private realms:

Liberalism has only one overriding aim: to secure the political conditions that are necessary for the exercise of personal freedom. . . . [Liberalism] must reject only

those political doctrines that do not recognize any difference between the spheres of the personal and the public. Because of the primacy of toleration as the irreducible limit on public agents, liberals must always draw such a line. This is not historically a permanent or unalterable boundary, but it does require that every public policy be considered with this separation in mind and be consciously defended as meeting its most severe current standard.⁷

According to Shklar, then, liberalism has the primary aim of protecting “personal freedom” that occurs on the private side of the public/private divide. As such, liberalism must always draw a line between public and private realms, although the location of this line may shift at different historical moments. Shklar’s analysis thus indicates that the private sphere, whether it is defined in terms of religion or sexuality, must necessarily remain untouched and uncontaminated by the intervention of public control in order to maintain the central mandate of liberalism.

Although Shklar usefully sketches the way in which liberalism relies upon the public/private division, I would disagree with her characterization of the private sphere as independent from the public sphere. Rather than view the public/private division as one that preserves a private realm as sacrosanct from public intrusion, I would describe the two spheres as mutually articulating one another. Privacy, I argue in this book, is constructed and articulated in the public sphere. The privacy of women is the product not of women’s seclusion within their homes, but of a public articulation and valuation of women’s domestic position. Images of women, books written for women, and books written by women circulated in abundance between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries; women were not without ample representation in the literary public sphere. Yet much of what was established in public sphere discourse concerning women addressed the value (if not the sacred nature) of women’s association with domesticity and privacy.⁸ In the first chapter of this book, I cite Nathaniel Hawthorne’s awkward account of the logic that precludes women from appearing in the print public sphere. Hawthorne contends that when women write for public venues, there is “a sort of impropriety in the display of woman’s *naked mind* to the gaze of the world, with indications by which its inmost secrets may be searched out.” This, he concludes, is “an irregularity which men do not commit in appearing there.”⁹ Although I discuss this passage at greater length in the first chapter, it is worth citing here for the iconic image it strains to articulate: women who appear in public (even in writing) are naked. Hawthorne here *constructs* for us the nakedness of the female mind, of femininity itself; he creates the private status of women’s words, minds, and bodies by publicly displaying the image of the naked woman. Hawthorne’s image is both symptomatic and enduring: in a Supreme Court decision on

issues of privacy rendered as recently as 2001, Justice Antonin Scalia, delivering the majority decision, constructs a similar image of the naked woman in order to give legal meaning and clarity to the debated term “privacy.” The case, *Danny Lee Kyllo v. United States*, revolves around whether police use of infrared technology to locate heat-producing lamps employed for growing marijuana constitutes an illegal search, an illegal invasion of the privacy of the home. Although much of the debate in the case concerns whether the infrared technology is “through-the-wall” or “off-the-wall” surveillance—whether it truly invades the home—Scalia ultimately argues that infrared technology is invasive because it might be used to gather information about “intimate details” of the home: “the [infrared scanner] might disclose, for example, at what hour each night the lady of the house takes her daily sauna and bath—a detail that many would consider ‘intimate.’”¹⁰ While Scalia argues that all details of what occurs inside the home are intimate, the iconic image of privacy—a naked woman, publicly invoked—is crucial to the rhetorical construction of that argument. In the case of the images of naked women and privacy wrought by both Scalia and Hawthorne, we can see how the public sphere is used to create and circulate images that define women as private. More importantly, we can also see the way in which women are displayed (even when “naked,” particularly when “naked”) *in public* at the very moment when their private identity is seemingly articulated. Thus to say that women are absent from the public sphere because they are consigned to the private sphere is incorrect: rather, powerful *public* images of femininity identify women as private. In this book, I argue that both images of women (such as those cited above) and writing *by* women have been central to the workings of the literary public sphere from its inception in the seventeenth century. Part of what I seek to illuminate, then, is why that presence has so often been understood as an absence.

My argument thus relies heavily upon an understanding of the public sphere as the location of speech and writing—as the sphere of publicity most fully described by Jürgen Habermas. Habermas has linked the emergence of a public sphere of open debate to the historical development of liberalism. When individuals attained the means to debate their ideas in public (in newspapers, in coffeehouses), they created a social space separate from the state in which they were able to monitor the state critically and thus restructure the political organization of the society. The sphere of publicity described by Habermas is one that he diagrams as a third space (which we might call “the social”) standing between private individuals in their familial space and the state.¹¹ However, Habermas’s typology is confusing given that the “public sphere in the world of letters” is defined as a third space, yet it also seems, at various moments in the

text, to be assimilated to both the public and the private sphere. As Nancy Fraser points out, the term “public sphere” as it is commonly used (in broad theoretical and often feminist terms) tends to conflate three separate entities: the state, the paid economy, and the realm of public discourse.¹² The nomenclature of the “public sphere” and the liberal dichotomy between public and private has tended to cause the social space of the print public sphere to be assimilated, in theoretical models, to the public side of the public/private divide. Rather than relocate print culture on one side or the other of this divide, I want to argue that more attention should be paid to the way in which print stands as an intermediary location that helps to generate the meaning of both the private and public domains. In this book, I thus seek to open up and explore the space of the literary public sphere as a social space that links the public and private and mediates between the two.

In focusing on this intermediary space, I take explicit issue with a more standard liberal (and Habermasian) narrative that describes citizens as subjects created and fully constituted in private, familial spaces who subsequently emerge into the public sphere to debate rationally their (already constituted, already known) needs and desires. This temporal narrative (first private, then public) is one that has been used to taxonomize the disability and oppression of women under liberalism: as individuals who are primarily located in the private sphere, women never emerge into public, never attain the status of full participants in the rational, critical debates of the public sphere. Against this narrative, I suggest that the public sphere has never operated as a disinterested realm of reasoned debate. Rather, private subjects do not exist in advance of their entry into public debate with fully formed agendas ready at hand. I argue that public sphere culture (“public opinion” in Tocqueville’s terms, or the intermediary space of the social) is not only directed toward monitoring the state, as in Habermas’s model, but toward shaping or constituting private subjects who seek to emerge into public recognition. This public sphere, which I describe as particularly linked to literary forms of culture, is not only concerned with rational political debate but with the desire for recognition. In the space of the social, I argue, versions of private subjectivity are publicly articulated and individuals seek to emerge into public recognition by deploying publicly available codes of subjectivity. On this model, privacy has no ontological priority over publicity, and privacy, moreover, is itself the back formation of social negotiation. Rather than a Habermasian public sphere of rational critical debate, then, I describe the public sphere as governed by desire—by the desire of subjects to emerge into the space of subjectivity or social recognition. This model of the public sphere blurs the distinction between public and pri-

vate in part because it points toward the mutual constitution of public sphere recognition and private subjectivity. Reconfiguring the public sphere in this fashion causes some difficulty with terminology because the public sphere no longer appears quite so public, nor the private quite so private. I thus define the space of public sphere activity concerned with private subject production as the space of “sociality,” a term that I use to point to the public circulation of the desire for recognition that structures the liberal public sphere.¹³

As I demonstrate throughout this book, women are not in the least absent from the public sphere of desire: rather, their presence there is significant in both cultural and political terms. While I do not argue that women have historically had access to the same forms of public power that men have wielded, I do suggest that gender is a constitutive element of liberal political structure and that women are thus very much present, at every historical moment, in the public workings of sociality. The presence and importance of women (as well as the very definition of the term “woman”), I argue in the coming pages, emerge in a number of distinctly recognizable literary forms. In the chapters that follow, I trace specific historical instances of the shifting relations between liberalism and gender in the public sphere of the United States from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries. In so doing I aim to supply a prehistory to the nineteenth-century sentimentalism that has long served as the primary genre identified with women’s writing in American literature. Instead of locating the nineteenth century as a point of emergence for women writers, I will describe it as a point of convergence, at which many of the terms I have sketched here assume their most densely associated form— at which, for instance, privacy is most clearly related to gender and political subjectivity, and at which a binary model of gender is most strongly naturalized. In moving further back in time to show how this terminology arises, we see that it is not a question of women stepping out of privacy to become writers at this point, but of a tradition of gender formation in the public sphere that most fully naturalizes its own terms and divisions in the nineteenth century. For instance, although the nineteenth century may see an intensification of domestic affect around heterosexual marriage, in the eighteenth century, the family often seems hardly able to organize itself into a “natural form,” ready instead to violate its own uncertain premises through incest, seduction, and adultery.

Unearthing this prehistory changes the story of American literature in an additional fashion: it places writing by American women less squarely within a nationalist framework than most previous accounts of such work. Beginning with a discussion of Anne Hutchinson and the antinomian controversy, I locate the gendered terms animating this debate both within English religious histo-

ry and in relation to the new communicative norms governing colonial conditions. John Winthrop's *Short Story* concerning the antinomian controversy, for instance, is clearly written for an English rather than an American audience. In broader terms, a concern with gender and a new set of exchange relations can be seen to emerge out of the colonial condition in its orientation toward both English and American public sphere identity. Indeed, the notions of exchange, commerce, and sympathy that inform English fiction of the eighteenth century are arguably one effect of the economic and political revolutions set off by colonialism and early forms of global capitalism. Colonialism is the opening wedge of the world of commercial exchange and the "imagined communities" of Benedict Anderson's print capitalism. I relate these material developments to the ideological pressures brought to bear on the family and gender—the pressures that bring into being modern forms of the family and gender—and thus see literature as bound less to the nation than to developments that both cross and create national boundaries. The Anglo-American colonial world thus stands more at the origin of my account of liberal desire and subject formation than does the founding of the U.S. nation.

My account of the value and meaning of a literary public sphere in which women are full players is meant to challenge both a masculinist tradition of American literature (that has, indeed, long been under attack), and an account of the separation of public and private spheres that views women as external to a public sphere of print culture from its inception. A chorus of critical voices has recently argued not only that women have been excluded from the public sphere, but that the contemporary political public sphere is dangerously narrow or has collapsed altogether. The left has thus often had recourse to a republican rallying cry: if the public sphere were to be reanimated and made truly inclusive, it would enable a commitment to civic rather than individual interest. Iris Young voices one of the more compelling versions of this claim when she argues that we should not only imagine a more inclusive "heterogeneous public sphere," but that we must reconsider the way communication functions in the public sphere. Rather than conceiving of a public sphere in terms of rational critical debate in which we presume "the unity of the speaking subject, that knows himself or herself and seeks faithfully to represent his or her feelings," we must understand the affective force of language as well:

Communication is not only motivated by the aim to reach consensus, a shared understanding of the world, but also and even more basically by a desire to love and be loved. Modulations of eros operate in the semiotic elements of communication, that put the subject's identity in question in relation to itself, its own part and imagination, and to others, in the heterogeneity of their identity. People do not merely

hear, take in and argue about the validity of utterances. Rather we are affected, in an immediate and felt fashion, by the other's expression and its manner of being addressed to us.¹⁴

Young's argument clearly resonates with the animating theoretical claims of my study: the literary public sphere and its concern with forms of private subjectivity and subjectification must be understood as central to the politics of the liberal public sphere, not as external to them. Young thus speaks, here, to the issue of desire that is critical to my analysis of liberalism, yet I think she falls short of fully realizing the force of her own diagnosis. It is not merely affect that must be understood to matter in the public sphere (as opposed to reason); rather, affect and desire must be understood less as the effusions of certain kinds of subjects than as constituting all subjects. In other words, the desire for recognition shapes individuals in their most private dimensions. Thus the argument for a more inclusive "heterogeneous" public sphere falls short of directing attention to the ways in which heterogeneity is itself the product of public sphere dynamics of subjectification that are primarily coded as private.

Public sphere discourse, through the modalities of desire, creates subjects; thus what needs to be brought into public is not just difference, or different kinds of subjects, but different forms of desire and exchange together with an analysis of the structuring effects of desire. Lauren Berlant has argued that the public sphere has been collapsed into the private sphere, creating an "intimate public sphere" in which the workings of private life are tacitly understood as the basis of political identity but do not, insofar as they are private, make themselves available to forms of political and collective contestation.¹⁵ It is in the name of such contestation that the structural effects of desire call for analysis. The liberal desire that gives us the rich and textured terrain of private life does indeed individuate the subjects of mass culture, but it does so in relation to a structure—in relation to fictional moments of supposed identity, and thus in relation to mechanisms of mediation and exchange. It is the workings of this liberal desire that appear most prominently in the literary public sphere, and to which I turn in this book.