

David W Fletcher, January 2005

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Klein, Lawrence E. "Gender and the Public/Private Distinction in the Eighteenth Century: Some Questions about Evidence and Analytic Procedure." *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 29, no. 1 (1996): 97-109.

Lawrence Klein, Associate Professor of History at the University of Nevada (Las Vegas), counters the "domestic woman" thesis that Vivien Jones attributes to a "dominant eighteenth-century ideology of femininity" (97). He argues against strict binary polarization of discursive and operative worlds and postulates instead "the diversity of distinctions, the mobility of meanings, and the multiplicity of identity" (100). With a method of analysis more complex and fluid than simple dichotomy, Klein juxtaposes masculine/feminine and public/private in a variety of eighteenth-century contexts. He finds that "the hegemonic role often assigned to binary oppositions in [their] discursive worlds . . . is less solid and total than it is sometimes made out to be" (98). As a result of his lexical inquiries, he discovers several different public spheres, which he calls magisterial, civic, economic, and associative (103-104). Klein concludes,

Generally in the eighteenth century, the distinction between the private and the public did not correspond to the distinction between home and not-home. . . . Privacy was ascribed to forms of life that we would consider public. . . . People at home, both men and women, were not necessarily in private. Even if, then, women spent more time at home, they were not necessarily spending more time in private (104-105).

Klein believes that semantic domains, or "family portraits" (99), should define the lexical nuances of key words that inform cultural and gender studies. In this approach, he calls to his aid Trubetskoy, the Russian linguist and phonologist, and Wittgenstein, the Austrian-British philosopher of language. Notably, he shows how the complex nature of language, even in the eighteenth-century, prohibits "one 'public/private' distinction to which interpretation can

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confidently secure itself' (99). Further, Klein seriously challenges examiners to look more closely at the discourse of earlier periods from the viewpoint of the period's own semantic understandings, i.e., not anachronistically, and with emphasis on the relationship between space and language. Klein certainly gives the reader some well-documented public discourse from which private opinions about gender formation in the eighteenth-century can be scrutinized.