

Report: 'Eighteenth-Century Femininities: A New Chase Network'

This day-long workshop took place on Tuesday 29 September 2015 at Birkbeck, University of London, in the restored Keynes Library (Gordon Square). It was funded by CHASE, following a successful application by Dr Ann Lewis, Birkbeck (primary applicant) and Dr James Fowler, University of Kent.

The programme was as follows:

10.30am: Coffee, introduction, welcome (Dr James Fowler, Dr Ann Lewis)

11-12.30: Panel 1 – Feminine Types and Typologies: The 'Prude' and the 'Prostitute'

Dr Ann Lewis (Birkbeck): Class, Theatricality & Classification: Rétif, Mercier & Diderot on the 'Prostitute' in Eighteenth-Century France

Dr James Fowler (Kent): Prudes as Objects of Desire in Laclos, Rousseau and Sade

12.30 – 1.30: Lunch

1.30-3: Planning session: ideas for research collaboration, developing different strands of the project.

3-3.30: Coffee

3.30-5: Panel 2 -- Cross-Cultural Representations: England, France, Germany

Dr Emma Barker (Open University): Sentimentalism and Femininity in Eighteenth-Century Art

Dr Peter Damrau (Birkbeck): The Rediscovery of Eighteenth-Century English Female Writers in Germany

The event was well attended by participants from the following CHASE institutions: Birkbeck; the Courtauld Institute of Art; the Open University; the University of Kent; SOAS. There were around fifteen participants in total, all working on eighteenth-century texts, images and/or artefacts. Their collective expertise spanned Art History, Print Culture, History of Ideas, Literature, Critical Theory and various national traditions (including British, Chinese, French and German). Several research students from different institutions were present and participated fully in discussions.

The papers presented in the morning, by Ann Lewis and James Fowler respectively, converged on the question of typologies of women. The former focussed on types of 'prostitute', the latter on the prude as a category within libertine taxonomies. In the afternoon, Emma Barker related femininity to the portrayals of sentimentalism in eighteenth-century painting and sculpture, showing how these evolved in relation to each other and also historical events, including the French Revolution. Peter Damrau explored the reception of English female writers in Germany, showing how religious sensibilities formed a focus of reception, and created a context in which women readers became writers too.

The responses to all four talks were lively and varied. From these various discussions, there emerged a consensus concerning several main strands for future collaboration on eighteenth-century femininities (ECF). More precisely, the ECF network would:

- 1) Reflect on and research typologies of women in the eighteenth century (a web-resource would be set up in due course as a way of bringing together a range of key definitions and core primary materials from different cultures thus making them available to scholars and students from different disciplinary backgrounds);
- 2) Explore constructions of femininity in a variety of texts and images, including novels, plays, paintings, medical discourse, and 'mixed' genres (such as philosophical dialogue) – we would aim to identify particular collections (for example, of images), which could be used as a corpus for further specific investigation. These might include the Wallace Collection, the collections at the Courtauld, etc.;
- 3) Aim to adopt a global perspective concerning ECF, for instance by exploring femininities in China and Japan;
- 4) Critically review recent theories of gender by testing them against eighteenth-century examples situated in their historical and cultural context. This strand would draw on recent work in medical humanities, queer theory material culture, etc. We would aim to focus our workshops on a series of topics suggested by these theories (e.g. a first workshop around the notion of 'female authorship');
- 5) Complement existing work and projects on women writers, whilst aiming to bring together female and male perspectives, and not being restricted to any given national tradition (indeed, as suggested above, the transnational and cross-disciplinary aspect of the network would be one of its defining features).