

## JOYCE ELLIS, 'ON THE TOWN': WOMEN IN AUGUSTAN ENGLAND

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**para.1** Modern demographic research suggests that in what is known as the 'long eighteenth century' the female population of England's larger towns expanded dramatically, producing what one demographer has called 'a remarkable predominance of women' in contrast with the more balanced or emphatically male-dominated populations of smaller settlements. [...] All the evidence indicates that urban populations were unbalanced principally by a net inflow of female migrants.

**para.2** Hours of rigorous, computer-aided academic research has, therefore, vindicated to some extent the standard cliché of Restoration and eighteenth-century literature about women's enthusiasm for urban life. Women were consistently portrayed in plays and poetry of the period as being ready to adopt any stratagem, however underhand, to escape from the boredom and restrictions of the countryside. The young heroine of Etherege's *The Man of Mode* (1676), for instance, was so much in love with London that she 'can scarce endure the country in landscapes and in hangings'. In contrast, contemporary satirists represented towns in this period as 'female territory', meccas of unbridled consumption and frivolity to which women were irresistibly drawn.

**para.3** Of course it was not only women who expressed a preference for urban life: many men would have agreed with the north-eastern landowner who contemptuously refused his mother's pleas for his return from London in 1720 with the rhetorical question 'Surely you don't think me such a fool as to prefer the charms of a stupid, dull, country life to the pleasures of the Town?' But these pleasures were thought to be especially attractive to women, not simply because women were by nature self-indulgent and superficial, but because urban life allowed them to gain the upper hand in their age-old struggle to escape their natural subordination. What women sought in the towns, the satirists argued, was freedom from male control. Such claims, however, reflected long-standing literary conventions and equally long-standing male anxieties rather than contemporary reality. It is much more plausible to argue that urban life attracted a disproportionate number of women not because they were trying to escape from or to subvert accepted gender roles but because 'correct' female behaviour was all too often dysfunctional in a rural setting.

**para.4** This was perhaps most obvious in the case of women from the higher ranks of society, the main targets of male satirists, whose lives in



the country were increasingly circumscribed by conventional expectations of female fragility and propriety. Women from wealthy families were seen as the embodiments of their husbands' and fathers' status. It was, therefore, vital that they conformed to contemporary norms which had shifted decisively in the seventeenth century towards an ideal of delicate, innocent and essentially decorative womanhood. Women's physical and mental inferiority had, of course, long been an accepted fact, but at the same time the wives and daughters of wealthy farmers and landowners had been expected to play an active part in managing their households or even their husband's land: thus girls were trained in the many practical and supervisory skills they would need as adults.

**para.5** With an increasing wealth and sophistication of society, however, many of these tasks were taken over by professionals, allowing well-born women much greater leisure, but in the process creating a vacuum which the expensive 'accomplishments' that such women acquired from smart boarding schools or private tutors could not readily fill in a rural setting. Most of these new feminine skills were essentially designed to be shown off in public, and yet the demands of status and propriety meant that women's sociability was far more strictly controlled than that of men.

**para.6** Men could to some degree socialize with those both above and below them in the hierarchy without losing face: a great landowner, for example, could dine with his tenant farmers and local tradesmen as a gesture of neighbourliness and courtesy. Women, however, could only mix with their equals, so that a woman's opportunities for sociability outside her immediate family were confined to those of her own social standing who lived within travelling distance. Unfortunately, well-born women were much less mobile than men. Relatively few women were able or willing to ride and were thus dependent on the availability of the family carriage unless, like Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*, they were prepared to walk.

**para.7** Even if a carriage was available, travel along unlit, unpaved country roads carried its own dangers: Elizabeth Montagu and her family were overturned so often on their way to visit friends that she 'began to think ... a bone-setter a necessary part of equipage for country visiting'. 'Fear', she declared in 1737, 'is never so powerful with me, as to make me stay at home' but floods, snow or mud sometimes made travel completely impossible. Lady Jane Coke, for example, was marooned in her house ten miles outside Derby for four months in the winter of 1748–49 by the 'continual rains' which made the roads impassable for a carriage. Of course, to some extent, her husband was marooned too, but men in this situation had many more resources to fall back on. The education given to men from the social elite was almost expressly designed for a rural setting. They were all, in effect, trained to be country gentlemen, able not

only to manage their estates but also take an active pleasure from them through riding, hunting, shooting and fishing. Their womenfolk, meanwhile, had no outlet for most of their particular social skills: instead they had to make do with recreational needlework, writing letters and reading whatever books could be found in the house, with frequent walks in the grounds between downpours as their only exercise. [...]

**para.8** Towns, in contrast, offered such women a variety of respectable occupations, amusements and companions, all of which they could enjoy in a degree of physical comfort. Young single women and widows were particularly prone to boredom in the countryside and had a greater incentive to settle permanently in town, but even married women felt the need for regular visits 'to brush off the rust a little'. The greater concentrations of both people and wealth found even in provincial centres meant that women could socialize on a much wider scale without sacrificing their status and respectability by mingling with those too far beneath them. The relatively compact built-up area of most towns was also an advantage, putting this wider circle of acceptable acquaintances within easy reach, especially as improvements in the urban environment, including better pavements and more efficient street lighting, and in public transport, such as sedan chairs and hackney carriages, meant that women were much more mobile in the town than in the country. [...]

**para.9** The urban environment also offered so many more places to go. The delights of Bath or London were obviously exceptional but even in much more modest towns the social calendar was enlivened at least once a year by a regular season of balls, assemblies, race meetings, theatre performances and concerts. Women sometimes took a leading role in planning and running these events. [...]

**para.10** The effects of maintaining these [social] distinctions meant that, in smaller towns, there were sometimes too few male partners for ladies anxious to dance, but at least they could (and did) dance with each other while their menfolk retreated to the card room. Moreover, whereas in earlier periods 'country ladies were stewed up in their father's old mansion houses and seldom saw company, but at an assize, a horse race or a fair', towns gradually developed a wide range of amenities such as landscaped walks, circulating libraries, and tea, confectionery or pastry shops where women could meet without the stigma attached to taverns or coffee houses.

**para.11** Above all there were the shops, which in the course of this period were transformed into 'perfect gilded theatres' providing 'as agreeable an amusement as any lady can pass away three or four hours in'. Sophie von La Roche, a German visitor to England in the 1780s, was impressed by the shopping facilities even in provincial towns, noting in particular the wide pavements which allowed well-dressed women 'to pursue their way safe from the carriages, horses and dirt', and the

combined effects of street- and shop-lighting which meant that window shopping could continue well into the evening.

*[Owing to the length of the original article, a section on poorer women and the town has been omitted.]*

para. 12 Although a few contemporaries seem to have been sympathetic to women's attraction to what one character in *The Country Wife* (1675) termed 'the innocent liberty of the town', on the whole the opinion-makers of Augustan England seem to have seen every woman as a potential 'naughty town-woman', attracted to the urban environment by expectations of a liberty that was likely to be very far from innocent.

para. 13 And yet in holding up the image of healthy, wholesome and rosy-cheeked countrywomen as the epitome of innocence and domestic virtue, such critics were ignoring the reality of rural life. The steady migration of women into the towns was the logical consequence of conventional perceptions of femininity and of correct female behaviour, perceptions which inflicted on country gentlewomen nothing worse than boredom but which made the lives of poor women a constant struggle for survival against the odds. In the towns, in contrast, these odds were tilted slightly in women's favour.