



Gendered Voices and the Public Sphere: Epistolary Discourse in Eighteenth-Century British Literature

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Abstract

Background and Aims: This study fills a gap in existing scholarship by applying Jürgen Habermas's public sphere theory to gendered literary discourse in eighteenth-century Britain. Specifically, it examines how gendered communication in letter-writing and satire contributed to shaping early modern ideas of the public sphere.

Methodology: Using a qualitative literary approach that incorporates textual analysis and comparative reading, the research investigates Samuel Richardson's *Pamela; or Virtue Rewarded* (1740) and Tobias Smollett's *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker* (1771).

Results: The analysis reveals how these works negotiate the complex boundaries between private domestic life and public political discussion. The findings highlight a distinct contrast between the texts: Pamela demonstrates women's indirect participation in public life through private letter-writing, effectively transforming domestic confinement into public influence. Conversely, Humphry Clinker offers a broader satire of social and political transformation, reflecting anxieties regarding class mobility and the changing structure of British society. Ultimately, the study challenges the limitations of



Habermas's framework regarding women's participation, proposing that these eighteenth-century novels served as active spaces for public dialogue and moral debate.

Conclusion: This research underscores the significant role of literary form in reflecting and influencing the development of public sphere concepts during this period.

Keywords: Public sphere; Habermas; eighteenth-century literature; epistolary novel; gender studies

Introduction

The concept of the public sphere was significantly advanced in Jürgen Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (1962/1989), which traces the rise of print culture and political discourse in early modern Europe. Among the causes of this development was the shift in the relationship between the state and society. Habermas's influential work focuses on political involvement arising from the notion of public interaction. He gives a great deal of emphasis to the public sphere that established literary criticism in English society during this period, attempting to give rise to the bourgeois public sphere and highlight the advantages of public discourse and discussion. Habermas's description of the "public sphere" is the space for social interaction, a domain where private people come together as a public, making more distinct the different realms of the private and the public.

Outhwaite (1994) points out that the literate bourgeois public in the Enlightenment and Romantic eras played a part in taking on a political role of evaluating current affairs and policies of the state. The growth of the public sphere was embodied in many places: first, in private communication and in the media, then followed by salons, coffeehouses, literary societies, public houses, periodicals, and concerts. Coffeehouses were places to develop sociability, serving as hubs for gentlemen who shared similar visions. According to Habermas, these public spaces created communities that challenged traditional power structures. He explains that the bourgeois public sphere essentially consisted of private individuals who came together to form a public body. These groups began to claim control over public discussions that had previously been managed by government authorities, using rational discussion and reasoning as their main tool for confronting authority.



However, to understand the literary application of this theory, it is necessary to distinguish between state systems and the "lifeworld". The lifeworld is connected to the relations in a family (the private sphere), while the space for political involvement, actions, and opinions is connected to the public sphere. Habermas (1989) distinguishes a literary public sphere from the political public sphere, claiming that these two forms intertwine as "a public consisting of private persons whose autonomy based on ownership of private property wanted to see itself represented as such in the sphere of the bourgeois family". The general importance of the literary public sphere is for the expression of principles and culture. Habermas (1996) argues that public issues only gain attention when people can relate them to their own personal experiences. When these personal experiences are expressed through religious, artistic, and literary language, the "literary" public sphere becomes connected to the political public sphere.

Critically, the emergence of this public sphere coincided with the rise of new literary forms, especially the epistolary novel, which offered women a semi-public voice often excluded from the male-dominated coffeehouses. While print was a medium that developed individuals to reflect to oneself, reconstructing them into a rational and critical public, the act of reading and letter-writing played a unique role for women. Writers and readers consciously knew that there underlies a complexity of privacy within these texts. Instead of merely presenting abstract ideas, letter-writing and print culture allowed women writers and characters to shape public opinion from within the domestic sphere. This suggests that the literary public sphere was not just a training ground for men, but a space where gender dynamics were negotiated.

Although Habermas acknowledges the literary sphere, he appears at times to be exclusive of women's place in the public sphere. This gives the impression that the spheres of the public and private are comparable to the concept of the separation of male and female spheres. Scholars like Fraser (1991) and Pollock (2009) argue that Habermas's model excludes women's participation, restricting them to the private realm of the family. However, by connecting feminist theory to literary analysis, it becomes clear that epistolary writing became a political instrument in women's expression. Despite the limitations of their juridical representation, women utilized the novel to participate in the "rational-critical" debates of the era.



Therefore, this study aims to reinterpret Habermas's public sphere through literary forms that reveal gendered experiences of publicity and privacy in eighteenth-century Britain. While Habermas's notion may be speculative regarding women, this research fills a gap in existing scholarship by examining how literature functioned as a space for gendered negotiation. Specifically, it will analyze the controversial subject of women's stance in the public sphere in Samuel Richardson's *Pamela; or Virtue Rewarded* and probe the structural transformation of the public sphere in Tobias Smollett's *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker*.

Research Questions

1. How does Jürgen Habermas's concept of the public sphere apply to eighteenth-century British literature?
2. In what ways does Samuel Richardson's *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded* reflect the boundaries between the private and public spheres, particularly regarding women's roles?
3. How does Tobias Smollett's *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker* portray the social and structural transformation of the public sphere in eighteenth-century Britain?
4. What are the similarities and differences in how *Pamela* and *Humphry Clinker* illustrate the duality between literature, private experiences, and the political public sphere?

Research Hypothesis

This study hypothesizes that while Habermas's public sphere theory is the foundational framework, the selected novels actively operate as correctives to the theory's gendered exclusions. It suggests that Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* utilizes the epistolary form to transform private domesticity into public moral authority, thereby creating a literary space that challenges the male-dominated public sphere described by Fraser (1991) and Pollock (2009). Conversely, it is hypothesized that Tobias Smollett's *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker* employs a satirical structure to critique the "structural



transformation" of the public sphere itself, revealing anxieties about social mobility and the democratization of print culture. Together, these texts demonstrate that eighteenth-century literature did not merely reflect the public sphere but functioned as an important tool for negotiating the boundaries of gender, class, and political discourse.

Theoretical Framework

The Bourgeois Public Sphere and its Literary Application

This study builds on Jürgen Habermas's foundational work *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962), which traces how educated middle-class people created new spaces for political discussion outside government influence. Habermas argues that coffee houses, salons, and print culture allowed private individuals to come together as a public to debate common concerns. His model distinguishes between the intimate sphere of the family, the public sphere of citizen debate, and the realm of public authority, or the state.

However, to apply this theory effectively to eighteenth-century literature, it is necessary to move beyond Habermas's sociopolitical history and engage with the "literary public sphere." As literary theorists such as Terry Eagleton and Raymond Williams have noted, the bourgeois public sphere was not merely a neutral space of rational debate but a site constructed through specific class ideologies and cultural forms. In this context, the novel functions as a vehicle for "rational-critical debate" where private values are tested in relation to public norms.

Feminist Reinterpretations and Gendered Exclusions

Critically, this study challenges Habermas's original formulation by integrating feminist critiques that expose the gendered limitations of his model. Scholars such as Nancy Fraser (1991) and Joan Landes (1988) argue that the bourgeois public sphere was constituted through the deliberate exclusion of women. Fraser contends that Habermas fails to recognize how the "masculine" nature of public discourse forced women to form "subaltern counterpublics," alternative discursive arenas where marginalized groups could invent and circulate counter-discourses.

Therefore, this research employs a modified framework that views the *epistolary novel* as a gendered technology of the public sphere. As Mary Ryan (1990) suggests,

women found ways to participate in public life through indirect channels. In *Pamela*, the epistolary form translates private domestic emotion into public moral authority, effectively subverting the binary between the "intimate sphere" and the "public realm." Conversely, Smollett's satire in *Humphry Clinker* problematizes the ideal of rational consensus, reflecting the fracturing of the public sphere amidst the social mobility of the late eighteenth century.

To clarify how these theories connect with the research questions, the study operates under the following conceptual structure:

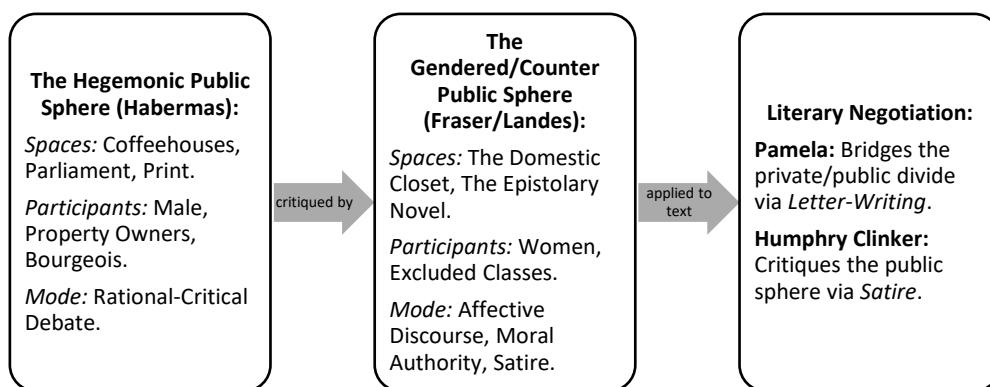


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of the Literary Public Sphere

This framework allows for a dual reading: recognizing the historical reality of the Habermasian public sphere while simultaneously using feminist and literary theory to critique its exclusions.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative literary analysis to explore how Jürgen Habermas's public sphere theory applies to eighteenth-century British novels. The methodology integrates historical hermeneutics with feminist literary criticism to interpret how narrative forms negotiate the boundaries between private domesticity and public political discourse.



1. Text Selection and Justification: Two eighteenth-century novels formed the core of this analysis: Samuel Richardson's *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded* (1740) and Tobias Smollett's *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker* (1771). These texts were selected to represent two distinct phases of the public sphere's development. *Pamela* was chosen as an exemplar of the early "literary public sphere," illustrating how private epistolary writing allowed women to participate in moral discourse despite their exclusion from political institutions. *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker* was selected to represent the later fragmentation of the public sphere, offering a satirical critique of social mobility and class mixing in a transforming Britain.

2. Data Collection and Historical Context: The first stage involved establishing the socio-historical context using both primary documents and secondary critical histories. This included analyzing eighteenth-century definitions of "virtue" and "publicity" alongside modern historical studies of the print market. By consulting sources on the rise of the coffeehouse and the epistolary genre, the study situated the novels within the specific "structural transformation" described by Habermas.

3. Interpretive Strategy and Coding: The textual analysis utilized close reading and discourse analysis to identify specific linguistic and narrative patterns. Following the critique of Nancy Fraser (1991) and Joan Landes (1988), the analysis did not merely summarize plot but coded textual passages according to three theoretical dimensions:

3.1 Domestic/Private Space: Scenes occurring in closets, bedrooms, or family estates.

3.2 Public/Political Engagement: Moments of publication, social debate, or interaction with legal/state authority.

3.3 Gendered Voice: Instances where female characters appropriate public language or where male characters critique domesticity.

4. Theoretical Application and Synthesis: The final stage is a comparative synthesis. This study applied Habermas's concepts of "rational-critical debate" to the coded data to test their validity. Feminist theory was operationalized to deconstruct these concepts and this emphasized on how *Pamela*'s "writing to the moment" functions as a counter-public strategy and how *Humphry Clinker*'s polyphonic narrative reflects the disintegration of a unified bourgeois consensus. This dual-layered approach allowed for



an assessment of how each novel not only reflects but actively critiques the gendered and class-based exclusions of the eighteenth-century public sphere.

Research Results

Gendered Privacy and Public Voice in *Pamela*

Richardson's *Pamela* explicitly engages with the boundaries of the private and public spheres through the protagonist's confinement and epistolary activity. As the analysis reveals, the domestic and private sphere in *Pamela* is physically located in the rooms where she writes her letters. The female protagonist is locked in her private rooms, out of sight from other people, yet the readers witness the activities she engages in and investigate her thoughts and feelings. Pamela's room functions as a paradox: it is the place where she escapes from her surroundings and Mr. B, yet it is also the site of literary production.

Specifically, Mr. B gives permission to Pamela to use her late Lady's room in the Bedfordshire house. While this room is free for Pamela to access to "dress and undress," she primarily makes use of it "for writing, reading and storing her letters". This contrasts sharply with the male domestic space; Pamela writes that "[Mr. B.] went into his Closet, which is his Library, and full of rich Pictures besides, a noble Apartment, tho' called a Closet, and next the private Garden, into which it has a Door that opens". This distinction underscores that while the male "closet" opens to the world, the female closet remains a space of confinement, yet one that generates powerful public discourse.

The epistolary form supports the flow of Pamela's "intimate consciousness" through the technique Richardson calls "writing to the moment". Pamela relies on her letters to remember events, stating, "Dear Mother, Well, I can't find my Letter, and so I'll tell you all as briefly as I can". However, this private act becomes political. Blewett (2001) notes that Mr. B. is worried that Pamela's letters are "treasonable" because she "exposes," through letters written to her parents, his "private" attempts to seduce her. Thus, Pamela's voice serves as a reflection of the real world: women as powerful writers capable of turning the private sphere into a site of public judgment.

Satire and Civic Observation in *Humphry Clinker*



In contrast to the private intensity of *Pamela*, Tobias Smollett's *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker* utilizes satire to portray the structural transformation of the public sphere. The protagonist, Matthew Bramble, is a Welsh landowner and former Parliament member who initially appears as a "fiery, proud, and angry" man complaining about his health. However, his journey through Great Britain serves as a vehicle for observing society and the changing public sphere closely. Bramble's observation of London explicitly critiques the democratization of the public sphere. He observes:

"Every clerk, apprentice, and even waiter of tavern or coffeehouse, maintains a gelding by himself, or in partnership, and assumes the air and apparel of a petit maitre...In short, there is no distinction or subordination left --The different departments of life are jumbled together...The diversions of the times are not ill suited to the genius of this incongruous monster, called the public".

This passage represents Bramble's engagement in the critique of the public sphere, showing the struggles of being part of a society where "individuals must strive to be in the public sphere" but often appear self-absorbed. Smollett further complicates this through the character of Lismahago, who opposes Bramble in terms of liveliness and economic position, whereas Bramble possesses the wealth and independent opinions expected of the traditional public sphere.

Unlike the unified moral voice in *Pamela*, *Humphry Clinker* presents a "Scottish Tory" point of view where even the peasantry "are content, and wonderfully sagacious -- All of them read the Bible, and are even qualified to dispute upon the articles of their faith". This polyphony suggests that the public sphere was becoming a contested space of diverse voices rather than a unified bourgeois consensus.

Transformations of the Public Sphere through Print Culture

Both novels illustrate how print culture transformed private experience into public discourse, supporting Habermas's theory while highlighting its limitations regarding gender and class. In the eighteenth century, letters became the "force which carried the private into the public realm". In *Pamela*, the letters are intended for her private world, yet the reader's pleasure comes from the involvement in this private sphere which is an intimacy unavailable in public media. This paradox allowed women,



who were restricted to the private sphere and governed by the domestic notion of the husband, to access the political public sphere through the "rational-critical" potential of epistolary writing.

Similarly, in *Humphry Clinker*, the correspondence reveals the relation between "political behavior and the behavior of the mass public constituted through the medium of print". However, Smollett suggests that the moment correspondence is circulated, it risks losing the characteristics of a true "rational-critical" sphere, becoming instead a "jumbled" mass of public diversion. Thus, while *Pamela* uses print to establish moral authority, *Humphry Clinker* uses it to satirize the loss of social order.

Research Discussion

Rational-Critical Discourse and the Power of Affect

The application of Habermas's framework to *Pamela* and *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker* confirms that the eighteenth-century novel functioned as a vital component of the "literary public sphere." As Habermas (1989) argues, the literary sphere served as a training ground where private individuals learned to reflect on their subjectivity before engaging in political discourse. Both novels validate this by demonstrating how private letters, whether Pamela's emotional outpourings or Bramble's social complaints, became vehicles for public debate.

However, the analysis reveals a significant divergence from Habermas's ideal of "rational-critical" debate. While Habermas prioritizes rational argumentation, *Pamela* demonstrates that the "literary public sphere" was fundamentally driven by affect and morality. Pamela's influence over Mr. B does not stem from logical debate but from the emotional authenticity of her "intimate consciousness". This suggests that the eighteenth-century public sphere was not merely a space of rational consensus but a domain where "private" feelings were legitimized as public concerns. Thus, literature acted as a corrective to the strict rationality of the bourgeois public sphere, proving that moral sentiment was as politically potent as intellectual argument.

Feminist Critiques: The Epistolary Novel as a Counterpublic

The findings strongly support Nancy Fraser's (1991) critique that Habermas's model relies on a gendered exclusion that separates the "state" from the "family".



Habermas views the domestic sphere as a private refuge, but *Pamela* reveals it to be a site of political struggle. By confining Pamela to the "closet" and attempting to suppress her writing as "treasonable," Mr. B enforces the patriarchal boundary that Fraser identifies.

However, the study extends Fraser's critique by showing how women utilized the epistolary novel to form what she terms a "subaltern counterpublic". Denied access to the coffeehouse or Parliament, female characters like Pamela utilized the "print culture" of the novel to bypass patriarchal gatekeepers. As the results showed, Pamela transforms the "private" act of letter-writing into a tool of public surveillance, effectively "exposing" aristocratic vice to the judgment of the reading public. This confirms that women were not absent from the public sphere; rather, they constructed an alternative, morally centered public sphere that operated through domestic literature rather than political institutions.

The Trajectory of the Public Sphere: From Moral Virtue to Social Fragmentation

A comparative analysis of the two novels reveals a distinct historical evolution in the conception of the public sphere between 1740 and 1771. *Pamela* reflects the early optimism of the bourgeois public sphere, where "virtue" is presented as a universal currency that can transcend class barriers (allowing a servant to marry a master). In this text, the public sphere is a cohesive moral community where private goodness can reform public power.

In sharp contrast, *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker* portrays the later fragmentation of this ideal. Through Matthew Bramble's satirical lens, the public sphere is no longer a space of moral consensus but a "jumbled" marketplace where "every clerk... assumes the air... of a petit maitre". Smollett's use of polyphonic voices—juxtaposing the cynical Bramble with the naive Lydia and the "sagacious" Scottish peasantry reflects a society where a single, unified "public opinion" is no longer possible.

Ultimately, the intertextual comparison suggests that the eighteenth-century novel traces the decay of the Habermasian ideal. While *Pamela* celebrates the formation of a public sphere through shared moral sentiment, *Humphry Clinker* satirizes its structural transformation into an "incongruous monster" defined by commercialism and chaotic social mobility. This demonstrates that literature did not simply mirror the public



sphere but actively critiqued its changing nature, moving from a tone of earnest moral instruction to one of satirical disillusionment.

Research Discussion

This study establishes that Samuel Richardson's *Pamela; or Virtue Rewarded* and Tobias Smollett's *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker* function as critical sites where the boundaries of the eighteenth-century public sphere were negotiated rather than merely reflected. By applying Jürgen Habermas's framework alongside feminist critique, the analysis demonstrates that the "literary public sphere" was a contested domain where gender and class dynamics reshaped the ideal of rational-critical debate.

The findings reveal a dual trajectory in the development of public discourse. *Pamela* illustrates how the private, domestic act of letter-writing allowed women to bypass exclusion from political institutions, effectively transforming the "closet" into a space of public moral authority. Conversely, *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker* documents the structural transformation of this sphere into a commercialized and fragmented marketplace, utilizing satire to express anxiety over social mobility and the loss of traditional distinction. Ultimately, these novels confirm that the eighteenth-century public sphere was not a monolithic bourgeois entity, but a dynamic arena where "subaltern counterpublics" and satirical voices challenged the hegemony of the rational state.

Research Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several avenues for future research emerge that could further advance the understanding of gender, authorship, and public discourse in the eighteenth century.

While this study focused on canonical texts, future research should expand its scope to include a more diverse array of eighteenth-century works, particularly those by lesser-known women writers such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Eliza Haywood, and Frances Burney. Investigating these authors would allow for a deeper analysis of how literary forms beyond the epistolary novel such as satire, travel writing, and political essays, participated in shaping public opinion. Additionally, exploring non-canonical male



authors who responded to female participation in print culture would contribute to a more equal and understanding view of gender interaction within the public sphere.

Future studies would benefit from integrating feminist literary theory with cultural materialism to provide a critical understanding of how literature both mirrors and constructs gendered social structures. Specifically, linking Habermas's framework with feminist thinkers like Nancy Fraser or Rita Felski would offer productive insights into how women's voices subverted traditional public/private distinctions. Furthermore, comparative studies between British and European contexts such as examining the French salon culture or the German Enlightenment, would broaden the theoretical scope and highlight the transnational dimensions of gendered discourse during this period.

To enhance academic depth, future research should consider adopting methodological innovations such as digital humanities tools. For instance, employing corpus analysis of epistolary texts could trace linguistic patterns of intimacy, virtue, and authority across a large dataset of both male and female writings. Such quantitative approaches could reveal the evolution of public discourse more systematically than purely interpretive methods.

Finally, it is recommended that future scholarship explicitly address the contemporary relevance of eighteenth-century debates on gender and communication. Connecting historical literary practices to contemporary digital communication and online discourse allows researchers to illustrate the lasting influence of early modern gendered voices on present-day notions of public engagement, authorship, and the boundaries of the private sphere.

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