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Introduction: Charting Habermas’s “Literary” or “Precursor” Public Sphere

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Introduction: Charting Habermas’s “Literary” or “Precursor” Public Sphere

Most of the essays gathered here are elaborated from presentations delivered at the 2002 annual convention of the Modern Language Association. With the dual sponsorship of the Division of Literature of the English Renaissance, Excluding Shakespeare, and the Division of 17th-Century English Literature, three panels were organized to address the general question, “When is a public sphere?” We had organized these sessions in the spirit of historiographical clarity. The divisional executive committees had noticed that, in recent years, Jürgen Habermas’s enabling designation of a bourgeois public sphere that emerged at the beginning of the long eighteenth century was eliciting floods of interest among early modernists. Indeed, it was our sense that the length of the eighteenth century was increasing at a striking rate, for we had begun to notice—in books, articles, and dissertation chapters—frequent assertions of the emergence of a bourgeois public sphere in the sixteenth century, and particularly in the print culture of the sixteenth century. Indeed, one of us claimed to have read of the emergence of a bourgeois public sphere at the court of Richard II. Even though Habermas properly implies the existence of secular, civil publicities in Europe prior to the later seventeenth century, we all felt that the specificities of his hypothesis might be endangered by the failure to make crucial distinctions. Recalling what had happened a dozen years earlier, when the misappropriation of the term “deconstruction” contributed to the erosion of deconstructive critique, we were mindful of how a useful critical term can lose its leverage by enthusiastically lavish application, and accordingly we resolved to solicit papers that would interrogate the temporalities proper to Habermasian civil publicity.

Habermas begins his study with a sketchy narrative of the transformation of publicity from a personal attribute of feudal status, what he refers to as “the publicness of representation,” into a feature of the state. He recalls the Roman
legal opposition between publicus and privatus, but he does so only to repudi-
ate its relevance to the specific post-absolutist opposition between modern
publicity and privacy, the latter an apparent exclusion from the sphere of the
modern state apparatus, a mercantilist state apparatus structured by taxation
and characterized by a permanent administration and a standing army. He
insists, however, that modern privacy is not simply an exclusion, a derivation
from modern publicity, but rather its engine: that the rational-critical charac-
ter of modern publicity is derived from “the subjectivity originating in the
interiority of the conjugal family,” which, “by communicating with itself,
atained clarity about itself” (51).

Habermas solicits the collaboration of the literary historian by ascribing
distinctive social agency to literary practice: “Even before the control over the
public sphere by public authority was contested and finally wrested away by
the critical reasoning of private persons on political issues, there evolved
under its cover a public sphere in apolitical form—the literary precursor of the
public sphere operative in the political domain” (29). Habermas does not offer
a sustained description of this precursor of the bourgeois public sphere, and
his discussion suggests that it is somewhat casually conceived—an entirely
understandable conceptual lacuna, given the fact that the historical and ana-
lytic center of gravity of his study lies elsewhere. Roughly, the precursor
sphere is an amalgam that partakes of imperfectly articulated collectives: the
audience for printed books, a dimly conceived “reading public”; more specif-
ically, those long-distance traders and financiers who made up the audience
for manuscript and, eventually, printed news; alternatively, those who sus-
tained the culture of courtly humanism; the members of early secret societies
and academies; thearengers. Nor does Habermas provide anything approaching
a narrative of the conversion of the apolitical precursor to a properly polit-
cal form of the public sphere.

The major contribution of the essays gathered here in response to the
question “When is a public sphere?” is an enriched account of this, Habermas’s
“literary precursor” sphere. The essays effectively aim to clarify what might
most valuably be understood by this conception, sometimes suggesting that
features of the “mature” bourgeois public sphere are more than anticipated in
formations prior to the Enlightenment, and sometimes not anticipated at all.
All the essays recognize that both the precursor and the bourgeois public
sphere proper are cumulative, summaries of publicities that overlap socially
and affectively, and so their account comprises a tentative genealogy, a series
of micro-histories of various constitutive publicities.

In the collection’s opening essay, A. E. B. Coldiron identifies and tells the
richly suggestive story of the precursor collective that developed around the
initial production and dissemination of poetry through print in late-fifteenth-
century England. She draws attention to the paradox that this self-consciously
English sphere was largely foreign in composition, that is, in terms of its print-
ers and translators, scriveners and binders. In this sense, the English “public
sphere of early print,” as she calls the collective, is also a site of transcultura-
tion, a contact zone, and so this particular temporary, “apolitical” precursor
sphere has important and unstudied implications for our thinking about such
political issues as English nationhood, collective identity, and a “national”
poetry. David Norbrook’s focus is also international. In his finely nuanced
essay, he shows how another manifestation of Habermas’s literary precursor
sphere might be perceived in the mid-seventeenth century’s “republic of let-
ters.” On analysis, however, this particular humanist precursor turns out to
create more problems than it solves, for it seems to have been extraordinarily
uneven in its power to enable the kind of political self-realization Habermas
associates with the mature public sphere. In the case of women such as Mar-
garet Cavendish and Anna Maria van Schurman, writing and conversing in
such diverse national locations as France, England, and the Netherlands, this
unevenness is especially pronounced and suggests the continuing difficulty of
charting any kind of simple, smooth transition from the literary to the mature
public sphere. For Kevin Pask, the transition from literary to mature public
sphere may not be smooth, but the continuity between the two is already strik-
ingly apparent in the bourgeois qualities of new mid-seventeenth-century lit-
ery forms such as the familiar letter and the diary. What most interests Pask
is how even before the political conditions existed that would make the full
installation of the mature sphere possible, these forms reveal an ideological
contradiction that will define both the mature sphere itself and its (our) con-
ception of “literature”—that is, a tension exacerbated by the illusion that
membership of civil society is the same for both those with and without prop-
erty. For the precursor sphere simultaneously encourages a specious sense of
universality among those with property and a confused sense of cross-bias or
being thwarted by public life among those without.

Harold Love brings us back to the problem of transition. Fleshing out the
intriguing few paragraphs in Habermas on the history of musical audition,
Love deploys his account of the creation of a public for music in eighteenth-
century Britain as a model for how the mature public sphere might constitute
itself. The critical point, Love suggests, is that the imagined community of a
musical public made immediately possible by the interdependence of print
and conversation is ultimately contingent on the long evolution of innumer-
able, practical precursor mechanisms such as the exchange of partbooks
among private musical families, the organization of amateur orchestral and
choral societies, the introduction of concert subscription series, and so on.
The heart of the mystery lies in the incremental development of technical,
organizational, and institutional detail. What is perhaps most interesting
about Love’s model is that the musical public only becomes political at a
specific moment or tipping point of self-consciousness. Michael McKeon closes the sequence with a word-by-word analysis of Habermas’s phrase “bourgeois public sphere” in order to rectify common errors. Like Love, he is interested in the moment of self-consciousness or “explicitation”—in order to define that moment in England, to say exactly when is a bourgeois public sphere, we need to continue our focus more than anywhere else, he concludes, on the mid- to late seventeenth century. We need to “have recourse to seventeenth-century history.”

If the principal contribution of the collection is to clarify the problems attendant on the conception of a literary precursor sphere and at the same time to suggest how exactly Habermas’s analysis now preoccupies literary scholars and cultural historians, it also contributes by suggesting how scholars might best advance his analysis.

In order to arrive at a deeper understanding of Habermas’s still powerful and enabling conception of the bourgeois public sphere, a number of possibilities immediately come to mind. First, Kevin Pask’s thoughtful essay suggests what is to be gained by a more intense engagement with the discursive content of literary practice. Our current preoccupation with the sociology and economics of literary practice needs to be balanced or cross-fertilized by a more rigorous attempt to integrate that knowledge with our more traditional knowledge of the transformation of literary modes and genres. When examined through the lens of Habermas’s emerging public sphere, the decline of enormously prestigious humanist-aristocratic forms such as the epic take on renewed significance. Second, as Harold Love’s wide-ranging essay suggests, a full genealogy of the bourgeois public sphere needs to entail consideration of nonliterary precursors. In the context of seventeenth-century England, this means, most importantly, analysis of the precursor sphere of “ecclesiological” debate. As the work of a number of scholars has already made clear, the intense public discussion through print and conversation of religious issues from the 1640s is central to any understanding of the emergence of a secular public sphere. Habermas’s neglect of church politics, a sign perhaps of the Enlightenment genealogy of his own thought, remains to be corrected.

Third, the essays of Anne Coldiron and David Norbrook suggest what is to be gained by a more detailed examination, in both national and international contexts, of the relation between publication and publicness, specifically in Habermas’s sense of publicness as personal encounter and association. It would advance Habermas’s analysis considerably if we were to come to a more exact understanding of how the production and consumption of writing was related to the openness of criticism and the experience of opinion. And fourth, since Habermas sees Britain as the type or leading instance of the emergence of the bourgeois public sphere, much might be gained by focusing on London, specifically in analyzing how the concentration of the press in the city
fostered a national sense of London as the proper or natural place of British publicity. Our overall sense is, then, that though much has been done, there remains much more to be done for those who aspire to meet the challenge of Habermas’s work.

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Notes

