



The Gentleman's Daughter: Women's Lives in Georgian England

Amanda Vickery

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Eighteenth-century women have long been presented as the heroines of traditional biographies, or as the faceless victims of vast historical processes, but rarely have they been deemed worthy of historical enquiry. "The Gentleman's Daughter" provides an account of the lives of genteel women - the daughters of merchants, the wives of lawyers and the sisters of gentlemen. Based on a study of the letters, diaries and account books of over 100 women from commercial, professional and gentry families, mainly in provincial England, "The Gentleman's Daughter" challenges the view that the period witnessed a new division of the everyday worlds of privileged men and women into the separate spheres of home and work. Amanda Vickery invokes the women's own accounts of their lives to argue that in the course of the 18th and early 19th centuries the scope of female experience did not diminish - in fact, quite the reverse. Contrary to orthodoxy, in the 18th century there was neither a loss of female freedoms, nor a novel retreat into the home. In their own writing, genteel women throughout the Georgian era singled out their social and their emotional roles: kinswoman, wife, mother, housekeeper, consumer, hostess and member of polite society. To make sense of their existence, they invoked notions of family destiny, love and duty, regularity and economy, gentility and propriety, fortitude, resignation and fate. At the same time, as Vickery demonstrates, their social and intellectual horizons rolled outward: in their writing no less than in their reading, genteel women embraced a world far beyond the boundaries of their parish, while an array of new public arenas emerged for the entertainment of the proper and the prosperous - assembly rooms, concert series, theatre seasons, circulating libraries, day-time lectures, urban walks and pleasure gardens, as well as regular sporting fixtures and the assizes. This often humorous study offers an insight into the intimate and everyday lives of genteel women and aims to transform our understanding of the position of women in this period.

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