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# **Petticoat Politics in Eighteenth- and Early Nineteenth-Century Britain: Female Citizenship Revealed by the Digital Archive**

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## **Abstract**

*Analysing the extent of female citizenship in early modern Britain has always been a difficult task. The mass digitization of the established records for political history has enabled an evidence base to be systematically established in order to reveal the extent of women's participation. The ability to search hitherto inaccessible sources such as newspapers or parliamentary papers has demonstrated that women regularly performed roles as electors or public office-holders, that they attended sittings of Parliament, and that they utilised strategies such as petitioning for political purposes. Digitization also allows the interrogation of sources which, on the face of it, appear less promising for an assessment of the roles women played in the public sphere in this period. An understanding that sites such as the household provide evidence of a burgeoning female political culture has led to the reassessment of female literary outputs. The large-scale digitization of these texts, coupled with the advance of web-based lexical analysis tools, has allowed for a more nuanced interpretation of women and public life. This paper will use the case studies of local newspapers and domestic economy texts to demonstrate methodologies for uncovering evidence of female citizenship in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.*

The established narratives of political life in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century have assumed that it was a world that largely excluded women. Indeed, Lawrence Stone has gone as far as to suggest that 'women were as submissive

and dependent as the conduct books suggested that they ought to be.’ (201)

However, recently, these ideas have been challenged, and historians have begun to assess the ways in which women were able to negotiate the dominant patriarchal culture which placed them in a subordinate, auxiliary role. (Capp, 267-319) To some extent, this scholarship has redefined the meaning of politics and political culture in this period, moving away from a narrow concentration on the institutions and personnel of high politics, towards a more expansive public arena which is one that included women. Therefore, sites such as the home, marketplace, salon, and courtroom, have been explored for their potential for female participation in the public sphere. The practices of ‘polite society’ established new openings for women, such as the debating societies and literary clubs, where they could contribute as intellectuals and conversationalists. (Andrew; Thale) Radical politics have been uncovered in places as diverse as the prison and the tavern. (Parolin) Traditional locations for the development of political culture have been considered afresh. Thus, Helen Berry has challenged the notion that the coffeehouse was part of a male dominated public sphere, demonstrating the ways in which the coffeehouse periodical appealed to a mixed sex and mixed class audience. (Berry) Elaine Chalus and Sarah Richardson have similarly considered the strategies women employed to engage in electoral politics as patronesses, canvassers, and propagandists. (Chalus; Richardson)

This change of focus, which places the emphasis on the diverse spaces of political culture, has required a new methodological approach to the source material. It has been argued that women’s voices are missing from texts such as newspapers, pamphlets, letters, and parliamentary papers. Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford, ‘developed techniques of reading against the grain, of asking where women are absent as well as present in the documents.’ (9) However, the mass digitization of the established records for political history has revealed that very

often women did appear as political actors in these sources. Digitization has exposed the fact that women were always represented in the documents, but their presence has been overlooked by historians who made assumptions that they would be excluded. The ability to search systematically through swathes of hitherto inaccessible sources such as newspapers or parliamentary papers has demonstrated that women regularly performed roles as electors or public office-holders, that they attended sittings of Parliament, and that they utilised strategies such as petitioning for political purposes. Equally important is the ability to interrogate sources which, on the face of it, appear less promising for an assessment of the roles women played in the public sphere in this period. An understanding that sites such as the household provide evidence of a burgeoning female political culture has led to the analysis of new sources such as the developing genre of domestic economy manuals. A reassessment of female literary outputs including poems, novels, pamphlets, periodical articles, reviews, and translations reveals that women were providing commentaries and intervening in public affairs on a scale hitherto unrecognised. The large-scale digitization of these texts coupled with the advance of web-based lexical analysis tools has allowed for a more nuanced interpretation of women and public life. This paper will use the case studies of local newspapers and domestic economy texts to demonstrate methodologies for uncovering evidence of female citizenship in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

In his report on local taxation, George Goschen pertinently described British local government in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as, 'a chaos as regards Authorities, a chaos as regards rates, and a worse chaos than all as regards areas.' (Goschen, 190) The already baffling and complex structure of local governance that had emerged in the early modern period was compounded by additional bodies established in the early nineteenth century. The new institutions

usually did not replace the older organisations but stood alongside them producing a multiplicity of competing groups. They often possessed overlapping powers, many of which were discretionary, and each had a different electorate and form of government. Local government electoral processes frequently depended upon custom and local precedent rather than regulation from the centre. For women of the middling (and sometimes poorer) sort however, this chaotic and confused structure produced opportunities for them to participate, and to exercise authority in the local context. The customary nature of the community franchise resulted in a participatory local government system which was later described by Beatrice and Sidney Webb as 'an anarchy of local autonomy.' (4: 353) Mark Goldie has gone so far as to claim that 'the holding of the parliamentary franchise was not regarded as the pre-eminent criterion of citizenship.' He argued instead it was rate-payer's contributions at the village or township level, whether as voters or officeholders, that conveyed a sense of representative self-government. (153) Likewise Steve Hindle has recently referred to 'the diffused and extensive nature of social and political space through which power was transmitted' in the parish vestry. (204-31) Although more cautious than Goldie about the extent of participation, Hindle nevertheless considers engagement in local government a significant part of the political culture of the middling sort in early modern England.

The civil parish was the primary unit of local government in early modern England, and remained so until the reforms of 1889 and 1894. There were over fifteen thousand parishes compared with only one thousand of all other local government institutions put together by the early nineteenth century. The parish was the first point for the assessment of the poor rate upon which many other taxes were modelled. The main parish officers were the churchwardens, overseers of the poor, surveyors of the highways, and constables. There were also a

number of elected parish servants which included sextons, parish or vestry clerks, beadles, scavengers, and the master and mistress of the workhouse. The election and appointment of these parish officers was one of the vestry's most fundamental and fiercely guarded rights, with fines often being levied against those who refused to serve. The offices were usually automatically rotated between householders which meant that the potential pool of office holders was very wide indeed. In addition, all parishioners had rights to attend parish and rate-payers meetings to discuss the administration of local affairs. David Eastwood has estimated that around 400,000 people were attending such meetings by the end of the nineteenth century. (48)

Although this view of parish government as a model of participatory local self-government is not universally accepted, it is clear that the potential existed for a large number of residents to contribute to the government of their local community. But were women included? Goldie and Hindle both argue to the contrary, alleging that early modern parish government was exclusive male. However, they both cite a number of examples of female office-holding. In fact, women were able to take advantage of the often confused patchwork of local jurisdictions which did not specifically exclude them either from voting, or from holding office. They were also able to play a role in community governance, thus receiving what has been termed, 'an education in citizenship through local government.' (Smith, A. L.: 360) Although parish government generally became more exclusive in the early nineteenth century, women's eligibility to attend meetings, to vote and to hold office continued. The Sturges Bourne reforms of vestry government in 1818 and 1819 permitted a weighted franchise of ratepayers to establish select vestries, but the legislation did not specifically exclude women from the electorate allowing local custom to prevail.

The emphasis on local practices means that it is difficult to ascertain the nature and extent of women's participation in local government in the early modern period. Access to digitized resources provides the only means of collating their experiences in a systematic fashion. Collections such as the Burney archive of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century newspapers, pamphlets, and books, and the British Library nineteenth-century newspapers project provide comprehensive coverage of the nation's affairs, amounting to over three million pages. The Burney collection contains approximately 1,270 titles, and the nineteenth-century newspaper digital archive comprises 48 newspapers from all regions of England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland including 17 national, and 29 regional, newspapers.<sup>1</sup> Newspaper reports are often the only printed record remaining of women's presence in local government with few extant official records. The comprehensive search tools which accompany digital source collections, including fuzzy matching, enable swift and effective searching. Newspapers are notoriously difficult to analyse in their paper or microfilm format. They are rarely indexed, are densely packed with information, and news is often presented in a random fashion. Searching for slivers of non-standard information, such as the election of a female local officer, or women's participation as voters in vestry elections, would be a virtually impossible task if done manually. Newspapers offer a variety of content which may be searched or browsed separately. Thus announcements of local elections often appear in the classified advertisements as well as in the editorial and news sections. The fragmentary and disconnected pieces of evidence which emerge from the digital archive may then be matched up with other records such as the census, official reports, or local records.

The right of women to hold minor local offices was tested in at the King's Bench in 1739. (Smith, Hilda, L.: 324-62) The case of Olive versus Ingram concerned

the election of a sexton after the death of the previous incumbent, Robert Bly, at the parish church of St Botolphs without Bishopsgate in London. Two candidates offered themselves for election: Sarah Bly, the widow of Robert, and John Olive, the plaintiff in the case. When the polling books were examined it was found that Sarah Bly had 169 indisputable votes from male electors with a further 40 from women. In contrast, Olive had 174 votes from male voters with a further 22 given by women. Therefore, Sarah Bly was proclaimed as the victor in the election by thirteen votes and this was upheld by the court. The case demonstrated that female office holding was not unusual in England, the court concluding, 'there having been many cases where offices of greater consequence have been held by women, and there being many woman sextons at that time in London.' (Strange, 2: 1102) Indeed there seems to have been little controversy over the appointment of women as sextons in most areas with glimpses in a variety of local records of women fully performing the duties of sexton. A search of the Old Bailey Online reveals tens of examples of sextonesses appearing in the court records. For example, a witness in the trial of Hannah Rowney accused of stealing a prayer book and bible from St Katherine Creechurch in 1788 commented that, 'the sexton (who is a woman) has the care of them [prayer books]; they are locked up, or ought to be by her; the sexton has been appointed a long time, and I believe they are generally appointed by the vestry...' (Old Bailey Proceedings Online, trial of Hannah Rowney: t17880910-61) Sextonesses were often active in defending the property of the churches they served as this news article makes clear:

the Sunday last two Men well dressed came to Kingston Church, and were let into the Bailiff's Seat, and staid in the Church till the People were all gone, and then cut off the Gold Lace, Tassels and Fringe from the Pulpit and Desk: The Sexton Woman coming out of the Vestry, happened to spy what they were about, and attacked one of them, and got him down; but

the other coming to his Assistance, knocked down the poor Woman, and then made their Escape... (*Read's Weekly Journal or British Gazetteer*, 15 March, 1735. Web.)

Elections were held for sextons, as was the case with many other local posts. They were often bitterly contested, as many brought with them stipends and other privileges. Contests were announced in the local press. For example, the London-based *Gazetteer*, noted the 'great interest' in the post of sexton for Christ's Church Newgate-Street, which had become vacant by the death of the incumbent, Mrs. Durant. (*Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser*, 18 August, 1764. Web.) This is another instance of a mention of a female office holder in passing, drawing no adverse comment. However, if, the ability of women to stand for, and hold office was rarely questioned, the issue of women voters appeared more controversial and dependant on local custom and practice. Some parishes, for example Chelsea, claimed that there was no precedent for female voting, and therefore excluded women by resolution asserting 'the ladies and gentlewomen, widows and maidens, who pay and stand charged have not a right to vote in this election, there being no precedent in this parish for the same.' (Webb and Webb, 1:107) However, in other places women voters were positively encouraged, particularly if it was thought they might be of use to a particular vested interest. In Leeds for example, a select vestry had been established under the Sturges Bourne Act which was dominated by nonconformist radicals who then refused to set a Church rate. Local Tories insisted on a regular parish poll in an attempt to replace the dissenting churchwardens. In April 1835, the Tory *Leeds Intelligencer* outlined the strategy, 'the only method now left to the friends of law and order is to appeal from such packed Vestries to the parish at large. Nor will the appeal be in vain... Rated females are entitled to vote as well as males. We do not wish for a gynocracy; but we are sufficiently gallant to perceive that too many of the wayward lords of creation are disposed to make a bad world of it; therefore the

sooner the ladies interfere the better.’ (*Leeds Intelligencer*, 25 April, 1835. Web.)

The attempt to remove the churchwardens by appealing to female voters was in vain, they were re-elected with a majority of more than three thousand and Leeds continued to resist levying the Church rate. Less exalted offices were equally hotly contested. The post of Assistant Beadle of the ward of Farringdon Within in the City of London caused controversy, when over sixty female voters (mostly widows) assisted in turning a majority of fifty-six for one candidate into a deficit of thirty-seven. The local press reported with glee the confirmation of women’s right to ‘chuse the man of their *heart*’ and compared the attention given to the election with that of a parliamentary contest. (*General Advertiser and Morning Intelligencer*, 3 January, 1782 and *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser*, 5 February, 1782. Web.)

Evidence of female office-holders may be found in all the different sections of newspapers including news items, letters, obituaries, classified advertisements, and even wedding announcements.<sup>2</sup> For example, the *Gentleman’s Magazine* reported the death of Mary Marshall, who was elected sextoness of Sibsey in Lincolnshire in the 1780s, holding office for forty years. Her obituary stated that ‘she had never been once absent from duty until the day she died.’ (*Gentleman’s Magazine*, November, 1837: 539. Web.) Published correspondence with the editors of newspapers provides indications of public opinion on the issue of women’s authoritative role in their neighbourhoods. A letter from ‘Femina’ to the editor of the *Liverpool Mercury* in 1812 argued that women should oversee and inspect parish workhouses because of their ‘habits and education’ which makes them more competent than men for the tasks involved. The writer contends that they are not an innovator, wanting to place women ‘on an equality with men either in the senate, bench, bar, or pulpit’ but they are a ‘strenuous advocate’ for women’s abilities to be recognised. (10 January, 1812) Again, these details would

be difficult, if not impossible, to search for systematically by hand, and therefore the ability to scan vast quantities of text to uncover evidence of women's authoritative roles in their local communities, is essential. Articles on local female officials and women electors nestle side by side with information on the money markets and reports from foreign correspondents. The very randomness of their placement in local newspapers means that a researcher would need to read millions of pages of newsprint to discover these fragments of evidence of the role women regularly performed for their locale.

The judge in the case of *Olive versus Ingram* concluded that 'the office of sexton was no publick office, nor a matter of skill or judgment, but only a private office of trust; to take care of the church, the vestments of the minister, and the books, etc. of the parishioners'. This attempt to define local offices as 'public' or 'private' – the former open only to men – largely failed, and the case was used as a precedent for other landmark decisions in the later eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Nevertheless, the judgement drew attention to the wide range of posts that could be held by women in their neighbourhoods. *The Morning Chronicle* of 1834 noted the views of Mr Maclean, the Revising Barrister for Essex, who commented favourably on the abilities of women to perform the task of preparing lists of voters: 'In one instance I was attended by a *female* overseer, and it is due to her state, that the list furnished by her, and in her own hand-writing, was one of the most complete ever met with.' (4 April, 1834) In the same year, the *Essex Standard* reported that Mrs Pink, a wealthy lady, aged 95, was serving the office of overseer of the parish of Great Chasted, Doddington for the year. (10 October, 1834) This was probably an example of an office that rotated amongst the substantial householders of the parish which included female ratepayers. The right of women to hold these posts had been confirmed by a test case, *Rex versus Stubbs*, heard at the King's Bench in 1788. William Henry Ashhurst, the

senior puisne justice of King's Bench confirmed the right of Alice Stubbs, a wealthy widow in the parish of Ronton Abbey, Staffordshire to hold the office of overseer of the poor. The court confirmed that the sex of 'substantial householders' was not specified and therefore women were entitled to perform the post of overseer. The judgement extended the remit of female office-holding as defined in the *Olive versus Ingram* case. Women were eligible not only for private offices of trust but were also qualified to perform public duties. (Durnford and East, 2: 395-406) In Great Chastard and Ronton Abbey there were very few citizens available to perform the parish duties required. However, women were also chosen for office in more substantial places. A 1792 edition of the *Morning Chronicle*, in a news item entitled 'Rights of Women', noted that the following offices were all held by females in the town of Ottery St Mary in Devon: the organist, clerk, sexton, cryer, and letter-carrier. The reporter was so struck by this example of woman power that they were moved to add a verse to the news item:

And if your beard demands the BARBER's art,  
A FEMALE enters, and performs the part:  
Smooth o'er your chin, her easy fingers move,  
Soft as when Venus stroked the beard of Jove. (11 January, 1792)

Women were often expert at using the chaotic electoral system to their own ends. *The Northern Star* reported in 1843 that a notice was attached to the door of Birstal Church, on Sunday week, calling a vestry meeting in the usual way, to elect a churchwarden for the ensuing year:

At the time appointed, the *wife* of the assistant overseer entered the Vestry with the parish book in which the usual entry is made on such an

occasion, and after waiting nearly an hour and no person making his appearance, either lay or clerical, the good dame took her departure and budged home with the book under her arm. On entering her dwelling, her husband eagerly enquired who was appointed warden, to which she replied why *me* to be sure – *thee* ejaculated the astonished official, yes, *me*, reiterated the wife, for there has not been another living soul at the meeting, therefore, I suppose, I must be the churchwarden. (29 April, 1843)

Only three years before this event, the parish of Birstal had been subject to fierce debates and legal challenges over the levying of a church rate, and the position of churchwarden was therefore a significant position in the community.

This assessment of the evidence from the local press has demonstrated that women office holders and voters were not rare in local elections of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain. Examples are found in places as diverse as Edinburgh, Bristol, Leeds, London, Ipswich, Portsmouth, Dorset, and Whitby. Thus historians' tendency to marginalise, or more commonly to ignore, female participation in local government because of lack of evidence, is changing by the ability to search electronically a wide range of sources commonly used for political history in order to recover their contributions. Similar processes to unearth women's experiences may be applied to other digitized collections of political records, including Parliamentary Papers and Hansard, as well as less obvious sources, such as the Proceedings of the Old Bailey. Analyses of these texts allow the researcher to observe where women were present in the public sphere but rarely to hear their voice. Their position is reported and commented on by others. However, women also articulated their political views directly via various forms of writing and publication. The rapid digitization of these texts via subscription

services such as Early English Books Online and Eighteenth Century Collections Online, as well as freely available repositories including Project Gutenberg, the Oxford Text Archive, and Google Books, have provided ready access to the wide range of texts that women published in the period. Alongside the digitization of millions of pages of text, has been the development of tools to analyse them efficiently and systematically. This gives an opportunity to explore the implicit political commentaries in texts that seemingly address other issues.

One example of a genre of female writing that contains indirect reference to public policy are the manuals of domestic economy which began to be published in great numbers from the mid eighteenth century onwards. At first glance, these texts do not appear to offer much insight into the political culture of middle-class women. Indeed, their proliferation has often been utilised by historians to demonstrate the dominance of domesticity in Victorian middle-class culture. (Branca, Draznin) However, such readings often take these manuals out of their political context, and by using them largely as descriptive texts give a distorted picture both of the aspirations of the authors, and of their reception by their predominantly female readership. Along with the rise of the 'domestic' novel, these works are evidence of female authority and political power in both the public and private spheres. They demonstrate how far political concerns had penetrated the household, and many contain observations on women's education, the promotion of national and class identities, and the treatment of servants and the poor. Even the recipes contained in the manuals revealed their writers stance on whether the state or benevolent individuals should support the poor. Maria Rundell, for example, in her chapter entitled 'Recipes for the Sick, and for the Poor' proffered 'a few hints to enable every family to assist the poor of their neighbourhood at a very trivial expence.' (290-2) Invariably, the recipes for the poor centred on cheap soups, broths, or gruel including Rundell's 'Baked Soup'

and later, Mrs Beeton's 'Useful Soup for Benevolent Purposes'. Maria Rundell emphasised the economical nature of her recipe for 'Baked Soup': 'I found in time of scarcity ten or fifteen gallons of soup could be dealt out weekly, at an expence not worth mentioning.' She also advised that 'the fat should not be taken off the broth or soup, as the poor like it and are nourished by it.' In fact there is little evidence that the poor welcomed either the soup or the inference that they were ignorant in the 'cooking art.' Other writers, such as Christian Isobel Johnstone critiqued this self-righteous approach in her characterisation of Dr. Redgill, 'professionally devoted to benevolence and Christian charity', who 'made a long oration on the value of pork liquor for soup to the poor; charitable soup, *economical* soup, dealt out in copious libations to old women as often as very salt, and very fat pork was boiled in the Doctor's kitchen.' (15)

As Mary Poovey has clarified, the term *economy* originally referred to the practice of household management encompassing its financial, moral and personal aspects. It was only in the eighteenth century that the term was linked with the political, and thus the discipline of political economy was promoted as the science of managing the financial and human resources of a nation. (5-6) As a consequence, the science of domestic economy was established to distinguish the techniques of household management from strategies to direct the nation's economic wellbeing. Therefore, many authors consciously employed the term 'domestic economy' in their titles of their texts, the first appearing in the 1790s, and the content encompassed the whole range of household activities from medical care to animal husbandry. By locating the books in this emergent science of domestic or household economy their authors sought to establish a genre specifically for the newly developing households of industrial Britain. To some extent, the volumes could be portrayed as conservative, and representing the limited role of women in society. However, a closer analysis reveals, on the

contrary, the central part such manuals played in extending the discussion of women's varied roles in the public sphere.

Close reading of literature such as the domestic economy texts may be done manually. However, such analyses often miss the significance of specific words or phrases, particularly if the reader is not necessarily expecting to find them in the text. Electronic lexical analysis tools do not have any preconceptions about the text and therefore offer a neutral method of assessing such publications – often revealing unexpected results. The rise of the discipline of digital humanities over recent decades has led to the development of software and tools aimed specifically at arts and humanities scholars. These include the bibliographic and tagging tool, Zotero, and Omeka, a platform for publishing online collections and exhibitions, both designed by staff at the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media at George Mason University. The text analysis portal (TAPoR) housed at the University of Alberta has led the way in advancing tools for textual research. In particular, it offers the opportunity to edit, search, collocate, and statistically analyse a range of texts and has linked up with a number of providers of digitised media including Project Gutenberg, the Oxford Text Archive, the Old Bailey Online, and Eighteenth Century Collections Online. Humanities researchers have different objectives than business users, and, their sources are often messy, fragmented, and incomplete. Therefore, the provision of tools specifically designed to handle such documents has proved essential.

As an example of how such tools may fruitfully be applied for the analysis of the political content of domestic economy manuals, the innovative contribution by Frances Parkes, *Domestic Duties*, will be analysed. Frances Parkes (née Byerley) was from a family of thirteen. Following the early death of her father in 1810, she

opened a school with her sister, Maria, in Warwick in order to support their family. (Hicks) The school which moved to Barford in 1817 quickly established a high reputation, and the sisters educated the relatives of a number of leading Unitarians including Julia Leigh Smith and Elizabeth Stevenson (later Gaskell). In 1811 Frances married William Parkes, a Unitarian worsted manufacturer from Warwick. However his bankruptcy in 1818 forced Frances again find a means of raising income to support her growing family. In 1825 she published *Domestic Duties*, which reputedly drew on the philosophy of girls' education embraced by the Byerley sisters at Barford. In spite of its title, which implied female devotion to the private sphere, Parkes adopted an advanced stance on women's rights. In the advertisement for the book for example, she outlined her view of partnership in marriage:

It is not the desire, nor the intention of the author, to maintain unmodified the doctrine of passive obedience in the married female to the will of her husband. Such a doctrine may be regarded as incompatible with that spirit which woman assumes as her right... (3)

In order to interrogate the text more systematically to consider the prevalence of this theme, the preface was submitted to one of the TAPoR text analysis tools Voyeur, which presents a visual mapping of the frequency of words in the text using a cirrus or word cloud. (See Figure 1) The prevalence of words such as 'governed', 'power', 'happiness', and 'mind' demonstrate that the manual engages the reader with a world far beyond the domestic sphere. Although the dominance terms such as 'passive' may appear to contradict this, further analysis using the 'key word in context' demonstrates that, as in the passage cited above, Parkes always challenges the model of a submissive wife encouraging readers to modify or adapt their conduct to behave as equals with their husbands. For example: '...it may not be invariably the duty of the wife to yield her *passive* acquiescence to

the will of her husband.' (4) The textual analysis tools immediately offer a fresh reading of the text, which subverts the established view of the manuals as upholding the domestic ideal.

Figure 1: Word Cloud Analysis of Frances Parkes, *Domestic Duties*



The strong emphasis on women's rights, revealed by Voyer, is maintained throughout the four parts of *Domestic Duties*. Parkes presents her advice on domestic management using the technique of a conversation between a newly married woman, Mrs. L., and an older mentor, Mrs. B. The topics discussed are wide-ranging, incorporating comments on social relationships (with subsections on gossip, scandal and flattery); household concerns; the regulation of time; and moral and religious duties. Parkes accepted the central role of women in the household but she also stressed the importance of women's influence in the wider society. For example, she balances a conversation 'On the Danger and Disappointment attending a Mere Pursuit of Pleasure and Amusement' with one arguing 'The Opposite Extreme to be also Avoided'. She explained this concern in more detail: 'I mean the abandonment of a woman to household concerns, and to

the over-solicitous care of her children, involving her in an entire neglect of the duties connected with social life and good neighbourhood.' (344) Parkes was thus keen both to elevate the status of women's domestic role and to place it alongside other, equally valid, contributions to the wider community. Using as a model the new science of rational domestic economy, she carefully negotiated the boundaries between women's public and private role. By utilising electronic text analysis tools, it is possible to present an entirely new reading of the genre of domestic economy manuals to demonstrate how the authors were educating their readers to participate in the public life of a new industrial era.

Historians have been too quick to write off the opportunities for women to exercise citizenship in the period before their right to vote was formalised by legislation. There is a need to recognise an alternative framework for female participation: one which incorporates the myriad ways available for women to participate as active citizens in the early modern state. Although the official rhetoric may appear to exclude women from the public sphere, in practice they were able to develop a political culture which embraced all areas of their lives from the intensely domestic to the formal constitutional arenas of elections and office-holding. In their homes and households, women debated the political issues of the day. Their concerns are reflected in much of the literature they wrote and read including novels, poems, pamphlets, periodical articles, and even the manuals of domestic economy. Women also had a long history of occupying public posts, and of voting at a local level. The recognition of the right of women to take up local offices, the existence of female sextons, overseers and Poor Law Guardians proved important for the future of women's participation in politics. In the nineteenth century, the positive benefits women surveyors, overseers and guardians brought to their community gave early feminists evidence to construct

a rationale for female local government officials. This case was based upon their authority in the community, their practical experience in dealing with the poor and their ability to liaise with a range of professionals to provide a superior service. This reasoning was used for electioneering purposes in the early days of organised female candidacies in local government but was also recognised by official bodies such as charities and parliamentary commissions.

Definitions of female citizenship in the early modern period have been transformed by historians' access to digitized source material. This has enabled evidence to be gathered in a systematic fashion to support definitions of women's participation in the public sphere. The development of tools to analyse vast amounts of digital texts also enable historians to analyse such material neutrally and thus uncover hidden signs of women's engagement in constitutional affairs. It has also been necessary to broaden the understanding of where evidence of a female political culture may be uncovered. This has meant moving beyond the formal world of politics and elections (although women's participation may also be found here) and analysing a diverse range of spaces including the kitchen, salon, and courtroom. For it was in these very diverse places where women gained experience of political participation, honed their skills as office holders, and engaged in the practical activities of local politicians.

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<sup>1</sup> References will be given to the specific newspapers but all are found in Gale Digital Collections. "17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Century Burney Collection Newspapers." Web. 10 August 2012 < <http://gdc.gale.com/products/17th-and-18th-century-burney-collection-newspapers/>> and Gale Digital Collections. "19<sup>th</sup> Century British Library Newspapers." Web. 10 August 2012 < <http://gdc.gale.com/products/19th-century-british-library-newspapers-part-i-and-part-ii/>>.

<sup>2</sup> To give an example of the scale involved, a search for 'female voters' across the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century newspapers in the Gale Digital Collections returns 811 results. There are 45 mentions of 'female overseer' with a further 28 for the search term 'female overseers'. Less exact searching using the Boolean 'AND' operator obviously returns many more matches. Thus a search for 'women and elections' returns 65,966 results although clearly many of these will not be relevant.