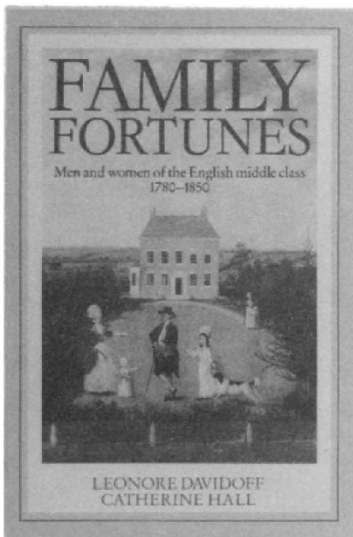


For Montefiore this general statement about contestation and transformation of inherited meanings is only a beginning. One reason why *Feminism and Poetry* is an important and valuable study is that Montefiore in her readings of a variety of women's poems actually demonstrates *how* particular poets negotiate their relation to poetic tradition in differing ways. Another is the dearth of feminist poetry criticism in this country, especially as compared to the United States and in contrast with the proliferating critical work on women novelists. And finally Montefiore manages to address in an accessible way such difficult problems as the notion of an authenticating female experience, of women's language and identity and the possibility (or not) of a truly feminine textual erotics, still giving complexity its due and never losing sight of her argument.

After Humm's recalcitrant search for a pluralist identity in feminist criticism and Montefiore's transforming struggle with the intricacies of women's poetry, Nina Auerbach's *Communities of Women: An Idea in Fiction* reads like the pre-feminist

scholarly exercise its tentative title suggests. Auerbach's stated aim is to make a case for a tradition of communities of women as a recurrent literary image, 'a rebuke to the conventional idea of a solitary woman living for and through men'. But an idea in fiction it remains. Auerbach's reading-with-the-grain of such a haphazard collection of novels as *Pride and Prejudice*, *Little Women*, *The Bostonians* and *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* fails to be convincing, even if taken by themselves her observations are often interesting. That failure is partly due to the fact that we are never quite sure what we are supposed to be convinced of, since Auerbach's definition of a community of women can range from the unfortunately-thrown-together Bennett sisters to Les Guerillères and back again. It is, to be fairer, probably also because *Communities of Women* was first published in the US in 1978, and that is a long time ago in the life of feminist criticism. An apter title for such a project now might be *The Girl Gang*, identity-crisis, squabbles and fights with parental figures and all.

Maria Lauret



Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780-1850

Leonore Davidoff
and Catherine Hall

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One of the more persistent problems of feminist scholarship is the question of how this work may be integrated into those existing forms of analysis which we would want to retain. Inasmuch as gender divisions are not the sole, or even necessarily the primary, structuring features of society, it is essential to examine their interrelations with axes of class, nationality, religion and other social

categories. Yet for the most part feminist studies remain apart from the mainstream, representing at best an additional chapter in the book, an extra couple of lectures on the course, a separate series in a publisher's list. This is, of course, both a problem of analysis (achieving a more comprehensive account) and a problem of strategy (making an impact on the mainstream of social and historical studies). One of the most exciting things about this book is that its very subject matter ensures that the links will be made, and that issues of class, of religion and of ideology will necessarily be seen to be centrally issues about gender. In both the detail of its historical scholarship and the clarity of its theoretical argument it abolishes once and for all those sterile, abstract debates about whether class or gender is the fundamental divide. Rather, it convincingly shows us that, at least in this period in English history, the two are intimately interconnected, each informed and produced in the terms of the other. What we begin to understand is that the transformation and consolidation of economic and social relations is thoroughly imbued with the categories, the values and the language of gender and the family. Conversely, the new forms of sexual divisions and relations are inseparable from the development of changing structures of class.

The book is a study of the English middle class from the end of the eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century – the period of transition to an industrial and an urban-based society, and of the formation of a new, and increasingly powerful, social group, the manufacturing and entrepreneurial middle class. *Family Fortunes* explores the lives of members of the middle classes in two areas, the industrial town of Birmingham and the agricultural counties of Essex and Suffolk. The research is based on the quantitative information available from census data and the qualitative knowledge gained from

diaries, memoirs and letters, as well as supplementary material from wills and other documents. The 'middle class' of this story is rather widely defined, including professionals, shopkeepers and artisans, as well as the classic bourgeoisie of industrial capitalists. For other purposes one might raise objections to this inclusive categorization, as, indeed, to the apparently unproblematic linking of two such disparate regions as a large industrial town and a predominantly rural area. (The analysis tends to treat the two in parallel, rather than as contrasts.) But since a central argument of the authors is that, *despite* economic, geographic, religious and political differences within this large and heterogeneous group, a unified culture and set of values was emerging, this inclusiveness is legitimate. Central to this culture was the developing ideology of domesticity and the centrality of the home. The chapters of the book document the processes and institutions in which these ideals were constructed and conveyed, their basis in contemporary religious beliefs, their relevance to contemporary modes of production, and their implications in everyday life.

The phrase 'the separation of spheres' is one that has had currency for some time, particularly in relation to what is known about the gradual but relentless exclusion of women from virtually all areas of productive work, and their increasing confinement to the home during the nineteenth century. We also take for granted the usefulness of the distinction between the 'public' and the 'private', accepting the feminist orthodoxy that with the rise of capitalism and the industrial revolution the former became the domain of men, the latter the domain of women. Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall challenge this notion that the process was one of straightforward gender-related segregation. Their evidence does confirm the fact that public and private spheres became distinct, a

development reinforced by the move to the suburbs and the geographical separation of work and home. It also records in great detail the reality, and the ideology, of women's increasingly domestic and restricted lives. (And in all this the quantitative and the factual is continuously and often movingly brought to life by the voices of the women and men themselves.) But the central argument of this book is that the public and the private are connected, and are, indeed, entirely dependent on one another. Men, operating in the public world of production, professions, politics and new urban cultural institutions, were only able to do so because of their other existence in the family. For many of them, the ideal of domesticity took precedence to the extent that they retired to the family-centred life as soon as they were able to hand on the family enterprise to the oldest son. For all of them, the family served as a crucial aspect of economic activity, whether in material terms (financial assistance, supportive activities of wife, siblings, children) or in ideological terms (definitions of masculinity, in relation to occupation as well as to wife and children).

A study as wide-ranging as this, dealing with work and home, city centre and suburb, varieties of religious belief, and the complexities of family relations, is bound to touch on some topics which it cannot consider in any detail. I would like to have known more about the reasons for the anti-urbanism which was so apparent among members of these communities, manifested in their idealization of the countryside, in poetry and other writing, and in the passion for creating gardens. The pride taken by many local industrialists and professional men in the transformation and improvement of city centres in the early nineteenth

century, and in the design and building of new institutions, suggests that this anti-urban tendency is at least a complex and contradictory one, only partly explained by the need, so thoroughly documented here, to achieve the separation of the domestic and the productive. It would also be interesting, given the necessarily broad sweep of the argument in *Family Fortunes*, to go on to explore the differences within the middle class, and the specific ways in which the interplay of family and gender, religion and economy operated in industrial city and rural town, in the northern manufacturing centres (very different in many ways from Birmingham) and in the metropolis, in professional and in mercantile groups, and, of course, among other sections of English society – the gentry and the working class – increasingly affected by these processes. But although we can see the beginnings of an answer to some of these questions in the book, this is not its main project. Its great success is in making connexions which have so far not been systematically examined, and in thereby vastly increasing our understanding of both class formation and the transformation of gender roles. The period taken by the authors, moreover, allows them to record the changes in ideology and practice in very accurate ways, often noting differences in lifestyle, dress, way of life and expressed values from one generation of a family to the next. Perhaps most fascinating of all is the hint, by the end of the book, that the very consolidation of the new ideologies of gender and domesticity began to create a moment of doubt among those women who were both their enthusiastic supporters and their increasingly powerless products.

Janet Wolff