

‘Arguments out of a pretty mouth are unanswerable’: The Representation of Female Community and its Effects on Periodical and Reader Identity in the Early Issues of Joseph Addison’s *the Free-Holder*

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It is with great Satisfaction I observe, that the Women of our Island, who are the most eminent for Virtue and good Sense, are in the Interest of the present Government. As the fair Sex very much recommend the Cause they are engaged in, it would be no small Misfortune to a Sovereign, tho’ had he all the Male Part of the Nation at his Side, if he did not find himself King of the most beautiful Half of his subjects. Ladies are always of great use to the party they espouse, and never fail to win over numbers to it.

Joseph Addison, *The Free-Holder*, Issue 4 (2nd January 1716)

I have heard that several Ladies of distinction, upon the reading of my fourth paper, are studying methods how to make themselves useful to the public.

Joseph Addison, *The Free-Holder*, Issue 8 (16th January 1716)

The portrayal of female communities within Joseph Addison's early Eighteenth-Century periodical, *The Free-Holder*, is currently an understudied feature of his journalism which this article will argue offers as yet unrealised illumination on Addison's conceptualisation of community and his broader social project as a whole.¹ It will demonstrate this through close analysis of the fourth and eight Issues of *The Free-Holder*, which will be seen to paint a picture of both female community and the imagined community of its returning readership. During these early issues the consideration of female community seems an uncharacteristic departure from the readership and interests established in the opening Issues. The periodical states in its first Number that it is addressed to the men of its title: 'Free-holders'.² As Addison explains:

A Free-holder may be a voter, or a knight of the shire; a wit or a fox, hunter, a scholar or a soldier; an Alderman, or a Courtier; a patriot or stock-jobber.³

A Free-holder is 'a considerable man.' He can be many things in addition to this title, but he cannot apparently be a woman. Yet, in Issue 4 there appears to be a proliferation of this core imagined readership. By Issue 15 Addison frequently addresses 'She Confederates', 'Sister Whigs' and 'the beautiful part of this Island [who are] amongst the most candid of [the paper's] readers.'⁴ This is less surprising in later Issues precisely because the identity and

¹ Addison's *The Free-Holder* first appeared on sale on Friday 23rd December 1715 and was released every following Monday and Friday until it came to a conclusion 55 Issues later on the 29th June 1716. In its original format each issue of *The Free-Holder* appears as an essay making up two sides of print.

² 'Free-Holder' is a legal term, signifying a person who owns an estate with a worth greater than forty shillings.

³ Joseph Addison, 'The Free-Holder Number 1', *The Free-Holder*, 23 December 1715, p. 1.

⁴ Joseph Addison, 'The Free-Holder Number 15', *The Free-Holder*, 10 February 1716, p. 1.

validity of a female community of readers is introduced and justified in Issues 4 and 8. For this reason these two early Issues will provide the material examined in this article.

I will argue that whilst female community is positioned at the centre of these two Issues they are not the centre of interest. Instead, they are used as a subject with which the periodical can explore political concerns of male community through comparison and analogy, that the model that it prescribes for women is used as an emblem that epitomises all of its political and social views, whilst also employing the treatment of women by the current government to further its ongoing endeavour to make readers ‘sensible to [the] blessings [that] are secured to us by his Majesty [George I], his Administration and his personal character.’⁵ It will demonstrate that whilst it is tempting to read these two issues as being concerned with the political empowerment of women, women are never the concern, but instead devices with which the periodical can further construct both its own identity, and that of its community of readers.

Addison’s work as a journalist has frequently been noted for its interest in and emphasis on the importance of community. Indeed, in his landmark text *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, the German sociologist and philosopher Jürgen Habermas relies heavily on analysis of Addison’s meditations and recommendations on the subject of community, as seen in the periodicals that he worked on with Richard Steele: *The Tatler* and *The Spectator*.⁶ In his later and far less studied periodical, *The Free-Holder*, Addison maintains his interest in community whilst also deftly highlighting the many distinct yet interrelated communities that existed within the whole. Many of the arguments that he presents throughout the *The Free-Holder*’s fifty-five issue run rely on or aspire to an

⁵ Addison, ‘The Free-Holder Number 1’, p. 2.

⁶ Jürgen Habermas, *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. T. Burger and F Laurence (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 33.

idealised model of community. Often this is achieved through the reoccurring image of a ‘happy tribe of men.’⁷ Addison teases out the connotations of the word ‘tribe’, defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as ‘a group of people forming a community and claiming descent from a common ancestry’, to present a model for society that is both self-perpetuating and self-protecting.⁸ Issue 5 clearly states that ‘the welfare of the community is the most important thing’, suggesting that if this model is adhered to England will be found ‘prosperous and flourishing.’⁹ However, this ‘proper sphere of action’ is predominantly portrayed as being one of masculine homosociality, rendering Issue 4 and 8 of particular interest as he attempts to imagine a similar model for a female community.¹⁰

There is an ever growing scholarship on the subject of female communities and their representation, engagement and interactions with the media during the long Eighteenth-Century. At the forefront of the field of Eighteenth-Century gender studies are works such as Karen Harvey’s *Reading Sex in the Eighteenth-Century*, which whilst focusing on extensive examples of erotica also highlights the emergence of periodicals in the mid to late Eighteenth-Century, such as the *Female Spectator*, which were marketed explicitly to a community of female readers.¹¹ There are also scholars such as Paula McDowell, whose work has drawn attention to the practical roles of women working within the Eighteenth-Century print market and demonstrated that women were amongst the first to seize the press

⁷ Joseph Addison, ‘The Free-Holder Number 1’, *The Free-Holder*, 23 December 1715, p. 1; ‘The Free-Holder Number 4’, 2 January 1716, p. 1; and ‘The Free-Holder Number 7’, 13 January 1716, p. 1.

⁸ ‘Tribe’, in *Oxford English Dictionary*, Online Edition <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/205725>> [accessed 3rd January 2011].

⁹ Joseph Addison, ‘The Free-Holder Number 5’, *The Free-Holder*, 6 January 1716, p. 1.

¹⁰ Addison, ‘The Free-Holder Number 5’, p. 1.

¹¹ C.f. Karen Harvey, *Reading Sex in the Eighteenth-Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

as a vehicle for public political expression.¹² Indeed, McDowell's work sits amidst a wave of gender-centric revisions to Jeremy Black's pioneering account of the rise of the British Press and its impact on Eighteenth-Century society.¹³ However, the ambition of this article will be closer to that of Margaret Hunt, who rather than examining the actual role of women, traced representations of female community within the press; identifying the few roles into which women were usually cast when characterised within London periodicals during this period.¹⁴ Similarly, this article will not be delving into the well established field of Eighteenth-Century gender studies, nor examining real female communities. Instead it will be looking at the ways in which female community is represented within Addison's *Free-Holder*, and asking why it is represented in this way.

Initially, Issue 4 describes the fortunate position of women under the current government of George I and tentatively suggests that they have a political utility. The opening line immediately employs the first person pronoun. It is the familiar voice of the 'British Free-Holder' established in the preceding three issues that will be telling readers about his observations on this topic:

It is with great Satisfaction I observe, that the Women of our Island, who are the most eminent for Virtue and good Sense, are in the Interest of the present Government.¹⁵

¹² C.f. Paula McDowell, *The Women of Grub Street: Press, Politics and Gender in the London Literary Market Place, 1678-1730* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).

¹³ Jeremy Black, *The English Press in the Eighteenth-Century* (London, 1987).

¹⁴ C.f. Margaret Hunt, 'Hawkers, Bawlers and Mercuries: Women and the London Press in the Early Enlightenment', *Women and History*, 9 (1984), 41-68.

¹⁵ Joseph Addison, 'The Free-Holder Number 4', *The Free-Holder*, 2 January 1716, p. 1.

That it is ‘the women’ and not ‘us women’ or even ‘you women’ also reveals that, at least initially, the imagined text/reader relationship of Free-Holder to Free-Holder is still intact. ‘The women’ are outside of this relationship. They are the subject; it is about them, not to them. That they are described as ‘the most eminent’ of all women is also telling that one of the periodical’s prime directives, to promote English exceptionalism, is also still coursing through the veins of this issue. Similarly it also foreshadows the way in which women will be employed in the rest of the essay; as products rather than participants of English society that blazon its virtues and finest features. This is immediately felt as this opening statement turns to the subject of ‘the present Government’, which is interested in ‘the Women of our island’. It is presented as being good that women are considered by the new government, but these women are not themselves part of this discussion. As seen before, ‘*the* women’ are not participants in this imagined conversation.

The Issue quickly launches itself into a discussion of the utility of the female community, claiming that ‘Ladies are always of great *use* to the party they espouse, and never fail to win over numbers to it’¹⁶ (emphasis added). However, whilst proving this claim it is important to remember that the periodical is not necessarily commending women, but justifying the government’s concern with them in order to suggest that they are beneficial figures, not just for society in general; but for its Free-Holder readership. The essay states that:

A Lover is always at the Devotion of his Mistress. By this means it lies in the Power of every fine Woman, to secure at least half a Dozen able bodied men to His Majesty’s Service.¹⁷

¹⁶ Addison, ‘The Free-Holder Number 4’, p. 1.

¹⁷ Addison, ‘The Free-Holder Number 4’, p. 1.

The periodical begins to highlight that through the influence that they have over lovers (a demographic which makes up at least one third of men) women also have a political utility. This is the ‘*power* of every fine Women’. The presentation of women is becoming one of ‘political agents’, although note that this is only the case for ‘fine Women’; not all women. Furthermore it would be as mistake to read this as female empowerment. Women as individuals are not really what are being considered here. It is about how this political ‘power’ is useful to men; specifically to Whig men:

[No] man of tolerable Breeding is ever able to refute them. Arguments out of a pretty mouth are unanswerable.¹⁸

Having argued that women constitute a community capable of fulfilling a political utility, the essay becomes a work of persuasion, suggesting reasons for why women should accept this utility. However, this is still not intended for their own benefit, but so that their ‘power’ should be available to be utilized by men:

There are many Reasons why the Women of *Great Britain* should be on the Side of the Free-Holder, and Enemies to the person who would bring in Arbitrary Government and Popery.¹⁹

Whilst listing these reasons, *The Free-Holder* itself uses the treatment of English women as a site from which it can epitomise many of its ongoing arguments and values, reviving its key interests in nationality, law, freedom and property. For instance, by discussing the condition of ‘British Ladies’ it is able to again stage England as a model that all other countries should aspire too:

¹⁸ Addison, ‘The Free-Holder Number 4’, p. 1.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

The Freedom and Happiness of our British Ladies is so singular, that it is a common saying in foreign Countries, *If a Bridge were built cross the Seas, all the Women in Europe would flock into England.*²⁰

Whilst broaching the topic of the Catholicism, the address to the reader suddenly becomes more complicated, as the essay appears at first to speak directly to a female readership. It is momentarily as though ‘the women’ are no longer locked outside of the imagined Free-Holder to Free-Holder conversation:

I shall only leave to the serious Consideration of my Country-Women the Danger any of them might have been in, (had Popery been our National Religion) of being forced by their Relations to a State of perpetual Virginitie.²¹

First, the periodical defers judgement to his country women, but for them to enact such a judgement would they not be required to read the text? This is followed by an address to ‘my fair readers’, whom the re-emerging egotistical ‘I’ of the periodical voice hopes will be ‘zealous in the protestant cause’.²² Aside from the effeminate ‘fair’, which has previously been used to explicitly signify Women elsewhere in this issue, that these ‘fair readers’ are described as belonging to the periodical voice (‘my readers’) is highly problematic, given that *The Free-Holder* has gone to great lengths to establish its readers as property owning male voters.

²⁰ Addison, ‘The Free-Holder Number 4’, p. 1.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

This is resolved somewhat by the periodical's conclusion, which hints for the first time at how women might fit into the imagined male Free-Holder to Free-Holder text/reader network:

It has been observed, that the Laws relating to *them* are so favourable, that one would think they themselves had given Votes in enacting them. [...] *They* have all the Privileges of English-born subjects, without the Burdens. I need not acquaint my fair Fellow-Freeholders that every Man who is anxious for our sacred and civil Rights, is a Champion in their Cause (Emphasis added).²³

This extract reveals the issue's true imagined reader. It is still not women. The case of women has been delicately employed to reiterate *The Free-Holder's* main interests and arguments: the defence and propagation of the 'sacred and civil rights' of men of his sort. It no longer appears to address 'my country woman'. Women are now once again referred to as 'they'. This periodical, just as its preceding issues, is speaking to 'fair fellow-freeholders', which are perhaps also the 'fair readers' referenced earlier. If it does contain an address to women, it is to be telegraphed to them through the male reader. This is most apparent in the closing paragraph:

We may therefore justly expect from *them*, that *they* will act in concert with us for the Preservation of our Laws and Religion, which cannot submit, but under the Government of His present Majesty; and would necessarily be subverted, under that of a Person bred on the most violent Principles of Popery and arbitrary Power.²⁴

Issue 4 is not addressed to women, but to the male Free-Holder community established in previous issues. Any hint at female empowerment is not for the benefit of women, but in

²³ Addison, *The Free-Holder* Number 4? p. 2.

²⁴ Addison, *The Free-Holder* Number 4? p. 2.

order that their political utility is recognised and available to the male voting public. Neither are discussions of the conditions of women intended for womanly gain, but used to epitomise the periodical's ongoing interests and values: law, freedom, property, English exceptionalism and the defence perpetuation of the good reputation of George I. Rather than representing a departure in topic and theme or a branching out to a new readership, this issue in fact bolsters the periodical's previously established identity, and still posits its regular readers at the centre of its concern. However, this apparent restoration of order and continuity with previous issues is further complicated by the revival of these arguments in Issue 8.

The Free-Holder's eighth Issue begins by commenting on the response of 'several ladies of distinction, upon the reading of my fourth paper', describing some of the suggestions that these 'ladies' have contributed. Having described this response it begins to make suggestions of how women should support the Whig cause. The extent to which this issue is actually interested in women, or instead predominantly interested in epitomizing *The Free-Holder's* argument and commenting on women only with regards to their utility to its male readers is further complicated by the essay's final portion, as the *Free-Holder* puts forward a suggested manifesto for a newly formed 'Female Association'.²⁵ So, does this issue actually consider female community for its own sake, or is it a continuation of the trends already seen in Issue 4?

Like Issue 4, this second essay does contribute to the continued formation of the periodical's identity. It opens with a self-referential assertion of the periodical's own history. Now that it has been in print for two months it is able to build on this history, and use its own continuity to add weight and credibility to its arguments:

²⁵ Joseph Addison, 'The Free-Holder Number 8', *The Free-Holder*, 16th January 1716, p. 2.

I have heard that several Ladies of distinction, upon the reading of my fourth paper, are studying methods how to make themselves useful to the public.²⁶

Seemingly Issue 4's observation that 'the women of our island, who are the most eminent for virtue and good sense, are in the interest of the present Government', and its argument that 'we may therefore justly expect from them, that they will act in concert with us for the preservation of our Laws and Religion' has elicited a response; demonstrating to the reader that *The Free-Holder* is having an effect. This is crucial for the identity of the periodical, for if this is to be believed, it proves that *The Free-Holder* is putting to practice what it preaches and benefiting the public. A self-perpetuating feedback matrix is increasingly evident, in which the periodical makes a statement, which causes an effect, which the periodical then reports on, no doubt prompting another effect. This appears to be a two way process of statement and response; recalling the mechanics of discussion. It seems the periodical is no longer presenting itself as a standalone utterance, but an invitation to an ongoing dialogue. The description of female respondents as 'ladies of distinction' suggests that they might present a female equivalent community to that of the male Free-holder readers, described in Issue 1 as 'considerable' men. The idea that these 'Ladies' are attempting to 'make themselves useful to the public' directly revives the topic of Issue 4, and as the essay lists the suggestions that these distinguished ladies have made, *The Free-Holder's* previous arguments can be heard to lurk in the background.

One has a design of keeping an open tea-table, where every man shall be welcome that is a friend of King George.²⁷

²⁶ Addison, 'The Free-Holder Number 8', p. 1.

²⁷ Addison, 'The Free-Holder Number 8', p. 1.

Using the political power of the promise of inclusion, the suggestion of an ‘open tea-table that’ caters only to ‘friends of King George’ explicitly recalls the suggestion in Issue 4 that: ‘[a] Lover is always at the Devotion of his Mistress. By this means it lies in the Power of every fine Woman, to secure at least half a Dozen able bodied men to His Majesty’s Service.’²⁸ This activity is also public-spirited, beneficial to society and the community and serves to aid the King. It is an action emblematic of everything *The Free-Holder* stands for, recalling the previously examined employment of women in Issue 4 to blazon the virtues recommended by this periodical.

The essay re-employs the address to ‘my gentle readers’, which was last seen in Issue 4, but has not been used in any other issues up to this point. This might suggest that, even if not directly addressed to one in the first remove, this advice is intended to filter through to a female audience eventually, even if like in Issue 4 it is to be telegraphed through a male reader to his female relations:

I would therefore advise these, my gentle Readers, as they consult the Good of their Faces, to forbear frowning upon Loyalists, and pouting at the government. In the mean time, what may we not hope cause, which is recommended by the allurements of beauty, and the force of Truth! It is therefore to be hoped that every fine woman will make this laudable use of her Charms; and that she may not want to be frequently reminded of this great Duty I will only desire her to think of her country every time she looks in her Glass.²⁹

There is also an equation of beauty and truth, which is used here to present women with a dutiful obligation. If beauty is truth, then the more attractive party is the truer one. Vice versa,

²⁸ Addison, ‘The Free-Holder Number 4’, p. 1.

²⁹ Addison, ‘The Free-Holder Number 8’, p. 1.

if you are a woman and you want to champion a cause, be beautiful, and everyone will believe in it. This is the duty of the Whig woman: ‘to be frequently reminded of this great Duty I will only desire her to think of her country every time she looks in her Glass.’³⁰ This call to duty precipitates a shift in the essay’s overall argument, as it moves away from reiterating and re-clarifying the suggestions made in Issue 4 and heads towards a distinct conclusion of its own:

But I do not propose to our British Ladies, that they should turn *Amazons* in the service of their sovereign, not so much as let their nails grown for the defense of their country. The Men will take the Work of the Field off their Hands, and show the World that *English* Valour cannot be matched, when it is animated by *English* Beauty.³¹

The Free-Holder is not asking women to become men, but instead that the female community use their distinct qualities to help the cause, just as men can be seen to use their male qualities. It suggests that both male and female communities are useful and that they can complement each other: ‘Men will [...] show the World that *English* Valor cannot be matched, when it is animated by *English* Beauty.’³² Crucially, where Issue 4 was about highlighting the ways in which women can be useful to the male body politic, and justifying the government’s consideration of women, Issue 8 is calling women to arms. Having recognized that women are of use, it is prescribing ways in which women might employ this utility. The periodical’s identity is shifting. As signaled at the outset of this Issue it is not only reporting on events, but generating them. It is no longer presented as a passive commentary, but a proactive and discursive utterance. This is seen explicitly as the essay concludes with a

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

manifesto, which it proposes for a newly formed ‘female association’ which has been ‘unable to agree among themselves on a form.’³³

Described as a ‘rough draft’, the manifesto begins by again evoking the ‘we’ pronoun, but it is this time complicated as it is presented as a ‘we’ that encompasses neither the periodical’s editorial voice or the voice of its readers:

WE the consorts, relicts, and spinsters of the isle of *Great Britain*, whose name are under-written, being most passionately offended at the Falsehoods and perfidiousness of certain faithless men, and at the Luke-warmth and indifference of others, have entered into a voluntary association for the good and safety of the constitution.³⁴

This ‘we’ is not the main periodical voice (that of *The Free-Holder*) or the reader (other free-holders). Instead, it is the main voice imagining itself as that of the women in this ‘female association’, inviting the readers to imagine themselves also as these women, as it speaks on their behalf. The level of prescription has increased, as it no longer suggests how these women should behave, but actually ventriloquises their opinion for them. Again, many of the items mentioned in this declaration directly relate to the values and ideas frequently presented in previous issues of *The Free-Holder*. The reference to ‘falsehoods’ recalls the critique of misrepresentation in Issue 7, whilst ideas of faithlessness recalls the meditation on oath-breaking and perjury in Issue 6.³⁵ The idea of ‘faithless men’ also chimes with the

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Joseph Addison, ‘The Free-Holder Number 7’, *The Free-Holder*, 13 January 1716, p. 2; ‘The Free-Holder Number 6’, *The Free-Holder*, 9 January 1716, p. 2.

periodical's ongoing distaste for 'mock-patriots'.³⁶ The suggestion of a 'voluntary association' of public participants brings to mind Habermas' conceptualization of the Eighteenth-century public sphere.³⁷ 'The good and safety of the constitution' are also core values of this periodical, examined in depth in Issue 5.³⁸

The most substantial affect that discussions of female utility in each of these Issues have is on the construction of the imagined identity of the readers of *The Free-Holder* and of *The Free-Holder* itself. It is able to assert similarities between its own identity and that of its readers by highlighting the differences they share to a distinct community of people, in this instance, 'the women'. 'I' and 'we' become an 'us', as together the periodical and its readers consider 'they', 'them', 'the women'; and suggest ways in which this 'we' might benefit from 'their' utility. The foregrounding of this utility also reinforces the periodical's own ambitions of 'open[ing] the eyes of my Countrymen to their own interest', whilst also staging the employment of this utility as a platform with which *The Free-Holder* can embody many of its values and ideals. This imagined text/reader relationship is complicated by moments in which *The Free-Holder* does appear to be making prescriptive statements to a female community. However, such instances do in fact contribute to the ongoing construction of the periodical's growing identity. Having established and re-affirmed its agenda it is now beginning to present itself as being proactive. It is becoming an entity that does not merely observe but also engages with society. Not only does it suggest change, but it makes changes. The discussion of female community and its potential utility provides an opportunity to demonstrate this, as the existence of Issue 8 suggests that Issue 4 has had an effect, and Issue 8 works hard to capitalize on this. The earlier Issue attempts to justify the Government's decision to consider female community, and the potential role that it might play in politics. In considering this it realizes their utility for itself, and having concurred begins in the later

³⁶ First introduced in Issue 1, this term originally refers to the 'Mock Patriots of Grub Street,' but is revived in most issues of the periodical to signify one who insincerely argues for or defends a cause in which he is not truly convinced by.

³⁷ Habermas has used Addison's canonical newspapers, *The Tatler* and *The Spectator*, to explicitly demonstrate the workings of the public sphere.

³⁸ Joseph Addison, 'The Free-Holder Number 15', *The Free-Holder*, 6th January 1716, p. 1. Addison uses this Issue to extol the importance of public spiritedness and suggests that all Free-Holders are duty bound to help preserve the community.

issue to utilize it by prescribing ways in which women might help the cause. This process itself demonstrates the way in which *The Free-Holder's* readers should respond to government policy: first understanding it, then endorsing it and finally aiding it in achieving its goals