

CARDIFF CORVEY: READING THE ROMANTIC TEXT

Archived Articles

Issue 6, No 2

PLANTING SEEDS OF VIRTUE
Sentimental Fiction and the Moral Education of Women

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PART way through Frances Burney's massive third novel, *Camilla*, the heroine's father laments the difficulties he has encountered in educating his daughters. '[T]he proper education of a female', he proclaims miserably, 'either for use or for happiness, is still to seek, still a problem beyond human solution'.¹ The problem of educating an eighteenth-century woman might well have been beyond human solution, but that did not prevent numerous writers, women as well as men, from tackling it. Indeed, given the subject of the standard sentimental novel of the day—the social education of a young woman—one could argue that *most* women writers of that era raised the question of education in one way or another. Nor were their discussions by any means confined to conduct-book platitudes about feminine modesty and decorum. While nobody seemed inclined to deny that preserving—or inculcating—such modest reserve was vitally important in any programme of female education, there was a considerable debate, especially among women writers, about what, if anything, beyond such modesty constituted feminine virtue and what sort of education was best calculated to produce a virtuous young lady. Of course, gendered ideas of virtue have attracted a considerable degree of attention in studies of eighteenth-century women's writing; frequently, such ideas have been presented as more or less thoroughly damaging. Yet given the pervasiveness of feminine virtue as a subject in women's writing at a time when increasing numbers of women were publishing and therefore demonstrably not silenced in any literal way, it might be worth exploring in more detail the ways in which late-eighteenth-century women could also use their culture's ideas about decorous feminine modesty as the basis of their own forays into the world of print. While the conventional female virtues of chastity and modesty were undoubtedly used as grounds from which to argue against women's participation in the literary world, it is possible that some ideas of virtue could be used to provide an implicit justification of women's participation in literary life.

It is, of course, needless by now to point out the dangers of a cultural idea of femininity that demanded women be educated into modesty and passivity. When Mary Poovey influentially argued that the figure of the 'proper lady' hopelessly restricted the literary work of most eighteenth-century women, or when Ruth Bernard Yeazell demonstrated that what she has called 'fictions of modesty' painfully limited women's social and intellectual worlds, they were both pointing to the constricting effects of eighteenth-century ideas of feminine virtue.² There is no doubt that where concepts of virtue differed for men and women, the results could be very restrictive, implicitly undermining women's claims to be the moral, if not the social, equals of men. Such assumptions of inequality would have received support from certain strands of eighteenth-century thought; for example, as Mary Seidman Trouille has recently argued, 'the scientific discourse of the Enlightenment tended to perpetuate, rather than to dispel, age-old prejudices against [women] and to intensify the traditional association of difference with inferiority'.³ More bluntly, Timothy Reiss claims that despite the 'many voices [...] raised throughout the eighteenth century in favour of educational opportunity for women, the idea of Enlightened reason excluded what it claimed as "female"'.⁴ While attacks on women's ability to reason did not necessarily imply that women were incapable of moral development, such attacks tended to forestall any role for women in speculations about morality, and hence in the debate about their own education. The bleakness of these observations is borne out by a survey of the genre of the conduct book, in which women are repeatedly enjoined to be chaste, submissive and obedient, as well as by the numerous satires of 'learned ladies' which appear throughout the century. Yet on at least one level, neither the advice nor the satires seemed to have much effect, as however much Enlightenment thought might have 'intensif[ied]' perceptions of women's inferiority, women had undeniably established themselves as participants in British literary

1. *Camilla, or a Picture of Youth*, ed. Edward and Lillian Bloom (1796; Oxford: OUP, 1996), p. 357. Subsequent quotations will be taken from this edition of the novel, and will be included in the text.

2. See Mary Poovey, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1984); and Ruth Bernard Yeazell, *Fictions of Modesty: Women and Courtship in the English Novel* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

3. *Sexual Politics in the Enlightenment: Women Writers Read Rousseau* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997), p. 43.

4. 'Revolution in Bounds: Wollstonecraft, Women, and Reason', in *Gender and Theory: Dialogues in Feminist Criticism*, ed. Linda Kaufmann (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), p. 12.

culture by the end of the eighteenth century. Any charts of the publication rates for British women show sharp rises and almost equally sharp falls for the period from the civil war through the mid-eighteenth century, but after mid century, the rise is steep and steady.⁵ Jan Fergus has in fact argued that ‘the opportunities for women to publish had never been greater’ than they were in the late eighteenth century.⁶ Even as Fergus recognizes the disincentives that continued to make publication difficult for women, her comment might invite us to consider why that society was increasingly willing to print and read work that seemed, simply by the sex of the author, to challenge some of the era’s most basic assumptions of gender roles.

There are at least two familiar ways of solving the problem of how women were able to write even as they internalized their culture’s restrictive concepts of feminine virtue: in one case, they are seen as being engaged in a lonely and probably doomed struggle against both their society and their own internalized concepts of modest feminine virtue; in the other, they are timidly upholding the dominant discourse—hugging their chains, in Mary Astell’s scornful phrase—in order to protect even the subordinate cultural space allowed them. Mary Wollstonecraft is perhaps the prime example of the former practice; a writer such as Laetitia-Matilda Hawkins, in her plea that women reject public competition with men, exemplifies the latter. ‘Let us then’, she pleads, ‘if we do not love darkness, be very careful to do nothing to provoke our superiors to take away the lamp they had allowed us’.⁷ Neither picture is entirely attractive; in both cases, women writers are presented as being trapped by, rather than participating in, the cultural debates about virtue and femininity swirling around them, and so such approaches risk making their work interesting mainly as documents in the history of social oppression. Yet trapped or not, such women at the very least found justification for their own publications in exploring the very concepts of virtue that supposedly denied them a serious voice in their culture. One can go farther, however, and argue that even many of the more conservative women, whose ideas were closer to Hawkins’s than to Wollstonecraft’s, did not see themselves as accepting, unproblematically, entirely restrictive ideas of female modesty. There are thus a number of bases on which women writers opposed the simple equation of feminine virtue with chastity and hence insisted upon the need for something more than a restricted education designed mainly to preserve modesty. The ideas of the radicals, who argued strongly that women and men, however different in body, were similar in mind and so would respond to the same educational methods, are merely the most amenable to later tastes. Yet even the more conservative women, who were prepared to concede some differences in mind as well as body between the sexes, were no less inclined to insist that there was, inevitably, some overlap in concepts of virtue and to use that overlap to undermine attempts to differentiate entirely between men’s and women’s education and, in the process, to insist that women had the right—indeed the duty—to participate in literary culture.

The ways in which the radicals justified their participation in debates about virtue and education are by now very familiar. Generally speaking, they insisted that the intellectual capabilities of women were fundamentally the same as men’s and that similar educations would produce similarly virtuous individuals—although even the radicals usually added the caveat that an aspect of such virtue involved recognizing and accepting that the sexes had different roles to play in society. A *properly* masculine education, grounded in principles of virtue, would not, in other words make masculine women. In part, supporters of this idea argued the point by citing famous women who were both well-educated and decorously feminine, such as the bluestocking Elizabeth Carter,

5. See, for example, the detailed studies done by Cheryl Turner, in *Living by the Pen: Women Writers in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Routledge, 1992).

6. *Jane Austen: A Literary Life* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan Press, 1991; Macmillan Literary Lives series), p. ix.

7. Laetitia-Matilda Hawkins, *Letters on the Female Mind, its Powers and Pursuits* (London, 1793), Letter I (unpaginated).

who famously won Samuel Johnson's approval because she could both translate Epictetus and make puddings—he, presumably, could only do the former. Nor did they rely only on their contemporaries for examples; they also looked back to the Elizabethans for models and found ample in the virtuously learned aristocratic women of that period. For example, many eighteenth-century writers cite an anecdote in which Lady Jane Grey, found reading philosophy in the original Greek while her parents are out enjoying themselves at a hunt, protests that 'their sports do not deserve the name, when compared with the enjoyment furnished by Plato'.⁸ Even the young Jane Austen, in her *History of England*, describes—admittedly, in a typically flippant manner—Lady Jane as being 'famous for reading Greek while other people were hunting'.⁹ In general, however, Lady Jane's scholarly tastes were admired not only by those writers who wanted a learned education for women but also by those more conservative thinkers who whole-heartedly approved of women who chose domestic amusements—even dauntingly scholarly ones—over public pleasure.

The point of such anecdotes was thus not merely to show that some exceptional women were capable of learning the classics without damaging their femininity. More importantly, they were also used to suggest that domestic virtues could be strengthened in women by the sort of education which was presumed to produce rational men, thereby undercutting any absolute separation between the sorts of education used to inculcate virtue in men and in women. The Whig historian Catharine Macaulay explains that because 'there is but one rule of right for the conduct of all rational beings' and so 'true virtue in one sex must be equally so in the other' she has 'given similar rules for male and female education'.¹⁰ Her younger, more famous contemporary, Mary Wollstonecraft, who opens *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) with a tribute to Macaulay, bases her recommendations for female education on similar principles, although she is a little dubious about the ability of most pupils, male or female, to follow Macaulay's rigorous syllabus.

Yet even these radical thinkers have not, according to some readers, managed to avoid the constraints of the gendered ideas of virtue they protest against. The criticism of Wollstonecraft's feminism, in particular, exemplifies such concerns. Numerous feminist readers, especially in the 1980s and 90s, have analysed the focus on restraint, on controlling the body, and on limiting pleasure, which marks Wollstonecraft's vision of how women are to make themselves virtuous members of a larger social community.¹¹ Ideas of chaste feminine innocence might directly exclude women from intellectual society, but Wollstonecraft's concepts of virtue, according to these critics, 'perpetuate [...] a patriarchal notion of rationality' which makes a place for women only if they accept the masculine discourse which excludes them in the first place.¹² This is an idea which Reiss, for example, has explored in detail, seeing Wollstonecraft's work as a classic example of the way in which 'the dominant discourse of Enlightenment reason assimilated dissenting voices and undermined their subversiveness'.¹³ Such arguments have their critics—Frances Ferguson, for example, has vigorously attacked what she calls the 'rampant "presentism"' of Reiss's argument: that is, the idea that we have access to a privileged position because our ideas are more sophisticated than those of the eighteenth century and that Wollstonecraft 'would have held our views [...] if she could have'.¹⁴ More generally, Virginia Sapiro has insisted that Wollstonecraft's political views were

8. Quoted in Lady Anne Hamilton's anonymous *Epics of the Ton; or, the Glories of the Great World. A Poem in Two Books* (London, 1807), p. 50.

9. *The History of England by a Partial, Prejudiced, & Ignorant Historian* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 1993), p. 10.

10. *Letters on Education* (1790; rptd. in facsimile, Oxford: Woodstock Books, 1994), p. 201.

11. For examples of such criticism, see Cora Kaplan's essay on Wollstonecraft, 'Wild Nights: Pleasure/Sexuality/Feminism', in *Sea Changes: Essays on Culture and Feminism* (London: Verso, 1986; Questions for Feminism series), pp. 31–56; Susan Gubar's 'Feminist Misogyny: Mary Wollstonecraft and the Paradox of "It Takes One to Know One"', *Feminist Studies* 20.3 (Fall 1994), 453–73; and Zillah Eisenstein's *The Radical Future of Liberal Feminism* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1993).

12. Kauffman, 'Introduction' to *Gender and Theory*, p. 3.

13. Kauffman, p. 9: these words are Kauffman's paraphrase of Reiss's argument in her introduction to his essay.

14. 'Wollstonecraft our Contemporary', in *Gender and Theory*, p. 60.

not merely ‘recuperate[d]’ by a dominant order and that she was in fact a major contributor to the critique of the Enlightenment discourse which Reiss sees as trapping her.¹⁵ Perhaps more to the point at the moment, however, Reiss’s argument—like other such critiques of Wollstonecraft—seems to take for granted the idea that her work failed, because ultimately she ‘differed little from those other women’ of her day who ‘“accepted the old conventional idea of womanhood”’ and who believed that ‘no alternatives were available’.¹⁶ Yet it is not entirely clear either that Wollstonecraft’s contemporaries were quite that simple-minded in their absorption of the cultural discourse about women and virtue, or that what Reiss has called the ‘constant subtle trap’ of the dominant, masculine discourse of feminine virtue was quite as nightmarishly inescapable as his language implies.

By the middle of the century, there had of course been decades of writing assuring women that their purpose in society was to be the embodiment of benevolence and sweet good nature, a role which didn’t necessarily involve the need for any education at all or anything other than vacuous sweetness to reward virtue in others. The poet James Thomson neatly sums up this idea, as, in an often-quoted passage from *Autumn* (1730), he exhorts women ‘To raise the virtues, animate the bliss [...] And sweeten all the toils of human life’ (ll. 607–08). Feminist writers then and since have of course objected that tirelessly sweetening other people’s toils—not to mention being altruistic exemplars of goodness—is neither an especially rewarding nor fulfilling activity. Yet as some eighteenth-century women suggested, an even more serious problem is that the concept of sweetly blank virtue is unworkable to begin with. Attacks on this concept often centre, explicitly or not, around the work of Rousseau, perhaps the most extreme proponent of this idea. His Sophie is supposedly a model of pure womanhood, all instinct and all innocence: ‘she has taste without deep study, talent without art, judgement without learning [...]. What charming ignorance! Happy is he who is destined to be her tutor’.¹⁷ Sophie’s mind, no less than her body, is to be preserved virginally immaculate for her husband’s pleasure and possession, an idea which predictably enough, drove female contemporaries such as Mary Wollstonecraft to furious attack. What is perhaps rather more surprising is that at least some writers who appear to uphold ideas of chaste domestic femininity are no less inclined to criticise Rousseau’s idea that one can create virtuous women by a careful programme of non-education.

Burney’s *Camilla*, for example, while never mentioning Rousseau directly, can be read as a critique of Sophie’s education, as the heroine’s father helplessly tries to find a way to educate his daughters with ‘as much simplicity as is compatible with instruction, [and] as much docility for various life as may accord with invariable principles’ (p. 357), a programme which, as Jane Spencer observes, attempts ‘to reconcile opposites: to create women of judgment, with their personalities left blank’.¹⁸ Just in case any Rousseauvian-minded readers might be inclined to sympathise with Mr Tyrold’s plan, Burney then devotes most of this massive novel—over nine hundred pages in the World’s Classics edition—to showing just how completely it fails to work. Camilla is a character who devotes herself to desperate attempts to ‘sweeten all the toils of human life’ for those around her, throwing herself wholehearted into her responsibilities as daughter, sister, and fiancée. Nonetheless, the choices she makes when confronted by moral dilemmas endanger the happiness of her entire family as well as nearly driving away her devoted but stern lover, results which eventually lead Camilla herself to a temporary, climactic bout of madness. Camilla’s hapless, well-meaning father is not entirely unaware, as he watches her life fall apart, that something has gone rather badly wrong in his daughter’s education, but he has no idea what could have been done differently. Left

15. *A Vindication of Political Virtue: The Political Theory of Mary Wollstonecraft* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

16. Reiss, p. 33. The phrase in double quotation marks is one which Reiss quotes from Erna Reiss’s *Rights and Duties of an Englishwoman: A Study in Law and Public Opinion* (Manchester: Sherratt and Hughes, 1934).

17. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Émile*, trans. by Barbara Foxley, with introd. by P. D. Jimack (1762; London: J. M. Dent, 1974), p. 360.

18. *The Rise of the Woman Novelist from Aphra Behn to Jane Austen* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), p. 164.

sweet and malleable, so that her future husband can shape her to suit his tastes, poor Camilla has natural abilities and ample good intentions but not much else to guide her, and the result is narrowly-averted tragedy rather than the smooth path to virtue and happily-ever-after marriage which such an education was supposed to produce. In a way, *Camilla* offers a more complex and tragic version of the comic story Burney presents in her better-known *Evelina*, in which the heroine, a genuine innocent in a society which prefers its ingénues knowing enough to follow the highly stylised code of behaviour it uses to signify ‘innocence’, stumbles from one near-disaster to another.

Burney’s contemporary Maria Edgeworth was less grim in her presentation of a girl who has been carefully trained to be a virtuous blank for her husband but no less critical. Indeed, she is even more direct in her attacks on such ideas than Burney, perhaps in part because of the influence of an eccentric family friend, Thomas Day. He was an ardent follower of Rousseau, had offered readers a solid, English yeoman version of the rational, independent-minded Emile in his *History of Sandford and Merton* (1783), and was perhaps even more sceptical than Rousseau himself about the idea that women might be rational beings. Edgeworth had parodied some of Day’s theories about the education—or rather, non-education—of women in her first publication, *Letters for Literary Ladies* (1795); in her novel *Belinda* (1801) she mocked his practice. Day, in a very literal-minded response to the story of Sophie, had adopted two orphan girls, planning to marry one of them after he had, in the words of his biographer, educated them in a manner which ‘unite[d] the purity of female virtue with the fortitude and hardiness of constitution of a Spartan virgin’.¹⁹ Probably needless to say, the experiment was not a success. One of the orphans, whom Day renamed Lucretia, proved to have nothing remotely classical about her except her name, and she was promptly apprenticed off. The other, Sabrina, was perhaps even less fortunate, as Day’s techniques for producing Spartan virgins in eighteenth-century England included practices such as dropping hot sealing wax on Sabrina’s arms to see if she’d flinch or—on at least one occasion—firing a pistol at her, apparently to test her nerves. (It was unloaded, but she didn’t know that.)

Edgeworth’s hero Clarence Hervey, while more gentle in his methods than his model Day, is no more successful. Having had the remarkable good luck to stumble across a beautiful, orphaned adolescent, who has never yet seen a man, while riding through the New Forest, Clarence promptly and hopefully changes her name from Rachel to Virginia St Pierre and sets out to train her to be his wife. Unfortunately, sweet, innocent, and virtuous as she is, she also, before too long, starts to bore him silly. As Clarence ruefully realises, his ‘intellectual powers’ and ‘knowledge’ are ‘absolutely useless to him in her company’.²⁰ Even more to the point, as he realises after meeting the no less virtuous but rational and independent-minded Belinda, Virginia is ‘so entirely unacquainted with the world, that it was absolutely impossible she could conduct herself with that discretion, which must be the combined result of reasoning and experience’ (p. 379). In other words, her innocence means that, at best, she can be a helpless dependent, and at worst, that she will promptly be destroyed by ordinary social life. This of course is not at all what Clarence was hoping to find in a wife; he was looking for intellectual companionship, or, at the very least, *intelligent* devotion. By thus providing her Rousseauvian hero with a Sophie of his very own, Edgeworth constructs a narrative which suggests that a woman whose only virtue is chastity would be the last woman in the world able to create the sort of domestic bliss which Rousseau celebrates at the end of *Emile*.

Sweet virtue, in other words, is not much good in either Burney’s world or Edgeworth’s without an accompanying dose of stern rationality. This is a key point, because as soon as questions of rationality are introduced, it becomes impossible to sustain any attempt to see women’s virtue as being entirely different from men’s. This project of arguing for educating women as well as men in rational virtue was thus by no means the sole preserve of the more radical writers. Almost all of the women writers we now see as being conservative do the same thing, although as they approach the

19. James Keir, *Account of the Life and Writing of Thomas Day* (1791; rptd. New York: Garland UP, 1970), p. 27.

20. *Belinda*, ed. Kathryn Kirkpatrick (1801; Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994), p. 378. Subsequent references will be from this edition of the novel, and will be given parenthetically in the text.

topic in their supposedly ‘feminine’ genres of fiction or fictionalised letters, they do so in a way very different from Wollstonecraft or Macaulay. While Wollstonecraft builds her arguments—or at least those in *The Vindication*—on the radical political theories of the early years of the French Revolution, her more conservative contemporaries tended to draw their ideas from a hodgepodge of intellectual sources: a little bit of Locke, some Francis Hutcheson, a dash of David Hume, and all of them, often as not, filtered through highly selective readings of Rousseau. The arguments derived from these theories are, admittedly, not necessarily anything the original theorists would recognise, much less accept. For example, a number of these writers absorb, directly or indirectly, Rousseau’s idea that raising a child to be rationally virtuous involves constant, carefully intelligent monitoring on the part of the educator, almost from the moment of the child’s birth. Then, cheerfully ignoring points such as Rousseau’s suspicion of conventional religious education—not to mention the hasty removal of Emile from both mother and wet nurse—they insist that the early moral and religious training provided by the mother is vitally important to human development and thus requires careful study and analysis by all women.

This interest in the theory and practice of early training in virtue is of course, in many ways, not much of a leap from traditional feminine roles, a point which might explain why writers we now tend to see as anti-feminist were so willing to embrace the idea. After all, nobody in later-eighteenth-century England ever seemed to doubt that women, or at least women of the gentry and upper classes, had some nominal responsibility as educators. It was taken for granted that it was a mother’s duty to provide all of her children with their earliest instruction and to continue training her daughters until they were young women. The boys, of course, as soon as they were old enough, would get their real education—their intellectual training—with tutors or at school. Yet especially towards the end of the century some women criticised this sort of educational practice not only for its obvious sexism but also by arguing against the concepts underlying the system, insisting that the most important part of education was not the Latin and Greek grammar painfully drilled into the boys and usually denied the girls. Rather, the essential part of education was the early training, which supposedly determined future character. While writers arguing this point did not necessarily deny the value of serious reading, they did insist that all the classics in the world would not make a good citizen of a child whose moral education had been neglected. Hence, according to such arguments, educated women and women as educators are the foundation of a virtuous society.

Of course, women making such claims would not have found the slightest support for this idea in the work of most eighteenth-century moral theorists. Not only did Rousseau have no difficulty in omitting women almost entirely from his plans for Emile, but also other influential writers, who shared some of Rousseau’s premises even while expressing reservations about Rousseau’s ideas of women, continued to downplay the seriousness of women’s contributions to education. Lord Kames, for example, insists, like Rousseau, on the vital importance of the early inculcation and reinforcement of moral principles in children—a task which, as he points out, normally falls to mothers. Yet Kames’s response to this arrangement is to praise providence for ensuring that it merely requires instinct, not a trained intellect, to provide such lessons. ‘Hard indeed’, he cries, ‘were the lot of the generality of the human race’ were the principles of education not intuitive, as most mothers would otherwise simply be unable to provide necessary instruction.²¹ Moreover, while the principles which must be inculcated during early lessons in morality can be rationally deduced, Kames argues, and their value proved by logical argument, doing so is pointless, as those who need such logical demonstration—mothers unsure of their duties—would be unable to follow it. In one neat step, in other words, Kames accepts as a corollary of his moral theories that women have a vital role to play in early education and simultaneously denies that that role means that they have to have any particular knowledge or education themselves.

21. Lord A. F. T. Woodhouselee, *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of the Honourable Henry Home of Kames*, 2 vols (Edinburgh: W. Creech, 1807), I, 207.

In making this argument, Kames was building on a tradition of moral theory which asserted that ideas of morality were distinct from and possibly antecedent to any sort of intellectual development. In particular, his older contemporary Francis Hutcheson had posited a sort of moral sixth sense, by which uncorrupted humanity was led naturally to prefer the good to the bad. While careful to avoid the troubled question of innate ideas, Hutcheson insists that benevolence can exist independently of rationality or self-interest, explicitly attacking thinkers such as Hobbes and Mandeville as he does so. David Hume, in a similar vein, although with a satiric edge lacking in Hutcheson, points out with dry irony that humans seldom let reason interfere with their passions, and so suggests that as ‘morals have influence on the actions and affections [...] they cannot be derived from reason’.²² If a sense of morality is instinctive and distinct from any reasoning faculty, then Kames’s idea that women did not have to understand virtue in order to teach it might seem sensible enough. Yet probably needless to say, many of the women who wrote about education were not contented with this idea that they should be decorative embodiments of moral concepts that they didn’t need to understand. On the contrary, they insisted that their lessons would be ineffectual unless they understood the principles behind the morals they were illustrating. Otherwise, all they could do was behave well by accident and habit, something that would not be sufficient if they were confronted with a moral dilemma outside the range of their previous experience—precisely what happens to Burney’s Camilla. Sarah Pennington, who wrote an educational tract in the form of a letter to her daughter, makes this point even more explicitly than does Burney. While all her virtuous instincts were confirmed and strengthened by her early education, Pennington explains, as she summarises her own past for the benefit of her daughter, that she unfortunately also absorbed the idea that ‘self-approbation’ was a sufficient mark of virtue long before ‘reason had gained sufficient strength to discover [the] fallacy’ of such a notion.²³ As a result, while assured of her own virtuous intentions, she is careless of her public reputation. And as with Camilla, the results of such ungrounded virtue are disastrous: Pennington is separated from her husband and children and facing serious questions about her reputation as she writes her open letter to her daughter. In other words, because she was trained in early childhood by people who had evidently not taken the trouble to use their own reason to deduce the value of reputation and then to inculcate that idea in her, all her virtues are more or less useless to her. As a child’s earliest prejudices and associations are absorbed before reason has a chance to operate, the educator—presumably the mother—must be able to reason about what associations it is vital to encourage in order to reinforce the blossoming virtuous instincts and train them in the right direction.

This is an idea which receives perhaps its fullest development in the work of the Scottish writer Elizabeth Hamilton, who apparently received part of her own education from a more or less surreptitious reading of Lord Kames.²⁴ Working from the same principles as Kames in her arguments about the importance of early education—indeed, Kames’s biographer, Lord Woodhouselee, called Hamilton ‘one of the ablest of those writers [...] who have treated the subject of education according to philosophical principles’—she nonetheless disagreed vehemently with his ideas about not needing to understand the principles of morality to be able to teach them.²⁵ Nor was

22. *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739–40; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), p. 509.

23. ‘An Unfortunate Mother’s Advice to her Daughter’, in *The Lady’s Pocket Library*, ed. Vivien Jones (1790; Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1995), p. 59.

24. The anecdote in fact embodies all the clichés about eighteenth-century women’s education; Hamilton recalls hiding the book when visitors arrived, as her aunt was afraid she’d be taken for a bluestocking. Yet, as another anecdote suggests, Kames seems to have been something approaching required reading for clever Scottish girls of that generation. Janet Schaw, accompanying a niece (who would have been about Hamilton’s age) to her father in North Carolina in 1774, tells of being caught en route in a terrifying storm. Taking up the nearest book, her niece—assuming it to be a Bible—began reading aloud for comfort but was so distracted that she did not notice until some time later that she had in fact been reading from *The Elements of Criticism*. As Schaw drily observes, they were preparing for their deaths ‘like philosophers rather than Christians.’ See her *Journal of a Lady of Quality* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1939).

25. Woodhouselee, I, 207–08.

she hesitant about proclaiming that disagreement. When Woodhouselee, gallantly hesitant to make a public attack on a lady, offered to drop his criticism of Hamilton's ideas, insofar as they differed from Kames's, from the published version of his biography, Hamilton no less politely declined the offer. In private, she was less polite, commenting tartly in a letter to friend that, in any case, 'It did not appear to me that his arguments [against her] were sufficiently strong to convince any one capable of reason'.²⁶

The central disagreement between Hamilton and Kames lies in the fact that Hamilton insists, Kames notwithstanding, that it will take more than instinct and a little good will to make women useful members of society. If women want to be effective in educating young children, she argues, they will need some acquaintance with intellectual theory—beginning with a solid understanding of John Locke's theories of the association of ideas and moving on from there. In particular, drawing on late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century aesthetic theory, as developed by members of her Edinburgh circle, Hamilton explores the implications of their belief that the higher powers of the imagination can be exercised only if controlled by a trained judgment and a mind well-stocked with ideas.²⁷ If women are to make proper use of their supposedly 'natural' tendencies towards imaginative sympathies—that is, precisely those sympathies which enable them to pursue virtuous lives—she suggests that they need to be able develop their intellects. Hamilton thus has the distinction of being probably the only person ever to find a rationale for the intellectual training of women in the aesthetic theories of critics such as Dugald Stewart,²⁸ Archibald Allison, and Francis Jeffrey. Perhaps not entirely surprisingly, Hamilton's male contemporaries thought she was being a little unnecessarily 'metaphysical' in her approach to the problem of women's education. Yet, throughout her career, in novels as well as in essays and in her collections of educational letters, Hamilton argues that head and heart must work together to form a virtuous adult, man or woman.

Hamilton thus insists, repeatedly and explicitly, that good principles cannot exist without some intellectual training. As she writes in *Letters Addressed to the Daughter of a Nobleman* (1806), one of the most solidly religious of her works, 'In the formation of the principles, the heart and the understanding unite'.²⁹ Here, she differentiates the development of principles from the formation of what she calls prejudices, which are merely 'the work of the feelings and imagination'.³⁰ In her terminology, even 'a respect for the institutions of the church' and a habit of 'repeat[ing one's] creed and say[ing one's] prayers' (I, 129) constitute mere prejudice unless they are based on a solid, rational understanding of the purpose of church and of prayer. To illustrate this point, she tells the story of Lady N——, a beautiful young widow who, as far as the world is concerned, is 'no less distinguished by exemplary virtue, than by her exquisite beauty' (I, 126). Yet like Burney's Camilla, Lady N——'s virtue lies only in obedience, rather than in solid moral principle, as she 'accommodate[s] herself to the inclinations of her parents, and her husband' (I, 127). Left a widow, with children of her own to educate, Lady N—— is helpless, and without ever quite realising that she is doing anything wrong, she abdicates—or, more accurately, remains unaware of—her

26. Elizabeth Benger, *Memoirs of the Late Mrs Elizabeth Hamilton*, 2 vols. (London: Longmans, 1818), II, 74.

27. For the fullest development of this idea, see Hamilton's *A Series of Popular Essays, Illustrative of Principles Essentially Connected with the Improvement of the Understanding, the Imagination, and the Heart*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: Manners and Miller, 1813).

28. Stewart was a personal friend of Hamilton's, as well as an intellectual influence. Her debt to him seems to have been shared by many of her more famous younger contemporaries; in his biography of Francis Jeffrey, Henry Cockburn mentions the pervasiveness of Stewart's influence on the generation who were young men in the 1790s—with Jeffrey, because his father's Tory prejudices prevented him from attending Stewart's lectures, a notable exception [*The Life of Lord Jeffrey, with a Selection from his Correspondence*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo, and Co., 1852), I, 45–46].

29. Compare her comment in *A Series of Popular Essays*: 'Where the sympathies of the heart have not been encouraged to expand, no cultivation of the understanding will have the power to render the character eminently great or good' (II, 257). While she is here approaching the issue from the opposite direction, the principle remains the same.

30. *Letters Addressed to the Daughter of a Nobleman*, 2 vols. (London: Cadell and Davies, 1806), I, 129. Subsequent references will be given parenthetically in the text.

responsibilities. The disastrous consequences which follow include the near death of her son, the sapping of moral principle in her daughter, and the viciously unjust treatment of a orphaned tenant, who is ‘left [...] to seek his way through a world in which he saw hypocrisy and falsehood triumph over innocence and truth [...] even when justice and judgment lifted up the voice!’ (I, 155).

This lesson about the results of a lack of rational judgment in nominally virtuous women could, in terms of plot, come from just about any eighteenth-century sentimental novel, and it might be easy to overlook, in the familiar style of melodramatic declamation, the significance of what Hamilton is attempting to do. She is very conscious about the advantages of fiction as a tool in developing—in her terms—principles rather than prejudice. As she explains to her young correspondent, ‘Truth, in order to render herself pleasing to the youthful mind, must sometimes permit herself to be arrayed by the hand of fancy’ (I, 212). Yet the advantages of fiction are not limited to the pleasures it offers the imagination; more importantly, it gives readers practice in ‘exercising [their] judgement’ in determining whether the actions represented ‘would naturally and inevitably lead to such and such consequences’ (I, 213). None of this is to say, of course, either that Elizabeth Griffith’s *The Delicate Distress* (1769) or other such novels of refined sentiment would necessarily have won the approval of David Hume or Francis Hutcheson, or that the writers pouring out sentimental fiction did so merely from the disinterested goal of exercising their readers’ judgement and illustrating Enlightenment moral theories. What it does suggest is that at least some writers were not prepared to see the ‘feminine’ genre of the sentimental tale as being entirely at odds with intellectual training and so were implicitly claiming a place for women and their writing in the cultural debates of the day.

This point is further illustrated in the work of an even more obscure Scottish writer named Jean Marishall, who, according to a brief memoir which she published in 1789, was a private teacher as well as a novelist and failed playwright.³¹ Like Hamilton, Marishall published her ideas on education in a collection of letters, supposedly addressed to a former pupil; also like Hamilton, she explicitly states in those letters that she has been influenced by the ideas and practice of the Scottish system of education. Yet Marishall differs from Hamilton—and indeed from most of the women educational writers of her era—in that she chooses to address her work to a male pupil, implying not only that, properly understood, female virtue requires the support of ‘masculine’ rationality, but also that such rationality might, in turn, need the support of supposedly ‘feminine’ sentimental virtue. While such a claim might seem to involve a major leap in logic, it is a point which Marishall insists upon, as she encourages her young pupil Charles to learn from both her own very moral inset tales, written especially for him, and from popular sentimental fiction. For example, she advises Charles to read Richardson in order to ‘impress’ in his ‘young mind a love of virtue’, assuring him that he will find many men as honourable as Sir Charles Grandison.³²

This apparently naive assurance is all the more striking when one contrasts Marishall’s treatment of the idea of learning from sentimental fiction in general—and from Richardson in particular—in her 1789 *Series of Letters* with the amused manner in which she had approached the topic nearly a quarter of a century earlier in her first novel, *The History of Miss Clarinda Cathcart and Miss Fanny Renton* (1766). When Clarinda is, apparently inevitably, abducted by a scheming aristocrat, it is a thorough familiarity with romances that enables her confidante Nancy to solve the mystery of her disappearance, while everybody else is left helpless and bewildered. Clarinda herself, who disdainfully greets her abductor’s housekeeper as ‘Mrs. Jewkes’, is also sufficiently well-versed in fiction to know the proper precautions to take while unwillingly under a dissolute gentleman’s roof. Yet if Marishall was at times prepared to be light-hearted in her treatment of the educational value of sentimental fiction, it is significant that she is more flippant about the subject in her own sentimental novels than in a book of practical instruction for a young man, a point which might suggest that she took the idea of training *men* in sentiment very seriously indeed. Marishall was of

31. *A Series of Letters*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: C. Elliot, 1789).

32. *Ibid.*, I, 191.

course fully aware that some would consider it impossible for a woman to train a man in either virtue or rationality. As she observes in the preface to *A Series of Letters*, conventional-minded readers will think she should ‘not have presumed to have found fault or pretend[ed] to instruct her superiors, particularly that Lord-like creature Man’ (I, x–xi). ‘But’, she then continues, ‘be this as it may, as she can by no means think that this kind of timidity [...] can at all contribute to the general happiness of mankind, she [...] has boldly ventured to give her simple opinion on subjects which she sincerely wishes [...] people of more consequence may exert their influence to enforce’ (I, xi).

If Burney and Edgeworth suggest shortcomings in treatments of women’s education which limit feminine virtue to sweetness and chastity, and Elizabeth Hamilton insists that women must have some intellectual understanding to fulfil their duties, Marishall goes farther still and implies that male writers—presumably, that is who she means when she refers, seemingly ironically, to ‘people of more consequence’—are failing both men and women by not fully recognising the connections between training the mind and training the heart. Feminine virtue can thus involve recognising and filling the gaps left in *men’s* education in order to preserve a virtuous, functioning society. I am insisting upon this point, perhaps a little too strongly, because such details as the evocation of a host of village Charles Grandisons blooming unknown might make it tempting to dismiss Marishall’s writing as frivolous sentimental hackwork. Yet Marishall is innovative not only in implying that women ought to have a say in the training of young men, but, perhaps rather more interestingly, in suggesting that the education of men ought to be more like that of women—thereby reversing the more usual feminist practice of calling for a more solid, masculine education for girls. Indeed, Marishall explicitly blames the problems of contemporary British society on the supposed fact that men are inadequately educated for domestic life. For example, a letter in the collection attributed to an unnamed male friend, but probably written by Marishall herself,³³ laments the fact that modern young men tend to be bad husbands and then suggests that this is a problem of national public interest, because ‘From domestic happiness [...] springs public tranquillity’ (II, 145).

This argument, whatever its source, is reiterated throughout the letters and underscores Marishall’s insistence upon the vital importance of domestic sentiment, and, by extension, the role of virtuous women, in the education of men. Arguing, in a long inset disquisition on her political viewpoints, that trust and benevolence are the necessary foundations of a just and rational society, Marishall implies that more traditional schemes for masculine education, which sideline women, are recipes for the destruction of the social order. Her main example to support this contention is Chesterfield—the villain of her book. Of course, Chesterfield is hardly a fair choice to exemplify traditional modes of boys’ education, but focusing on him enables Marishall to make, with considerable verve, her case that inculcating feminised ideas of virtue in men, as well as women, is not merely a nice, if unworldly, way to live; it is a solidly practical means to temporal advantage. After all, given the choice between doing business with Sir Charles Grandison and with a disciple of Chesterfield, there can’t be many people who would knowingly choose the latter. While Marishall’s arguments about the links between sentimental virtue and social education do not possess—and do not aim to possess—the careful intellectual subtleties of the moral philosophers, or even the rigour which one finds in Hamilton’s essays, her work is still noteworthy for its unusually explicit insistence upon women’s roles in teaching and reinforcing the idea that some of the conventionally ‘feminine’ values might be necessary in the training of virtuous men. When, near the end of her collection of letters, Marishall describes her task as that of ‘plant[ing] [...] seeds of virtue’ in her young pupil’s mind, she is thus simultaneously stating a rather trite commonplace and providing a quiet justification for her own intervention in a very large and important cultural debate.

Of course, neither Hamilton’s nor Marishall’s work undercuts the feminist critique of eighteenth-century cultural concepts about gendered ideas of virtue. Yet their writing, conservative as it might appear, helps show that ideas which state that women either mindlessly accepted a

33. Given Marishall’s willingness to admit that she fictionalized some of her letters, it is entirely possible that she also wrote the ones attributed to other, anonymous sources. There is certainly no stylistic reason to think otherwise.

system of gendered virtue which oppressed them, or, at best, blindly criticised that system in the terms of a masculine idea of rationality which inevitably left them trapped, silenced, and ineffectual, might underestimate the complexity of eighteenth-century women's contributions to debates about virtue and education. In other words, oppressive as they could be, interconnected concepts of morality and virtue also enabled women, at the time, to express a range of ideas about their own education—even if those ideas are not necessarily all that ideologically appealing to readers today. It is an obvious and indisputable fact that the dominant ideology of the eighteenth century discouraged women's participation in literary culture, but it is, increasingly, an equally obvious fact that large numbers of women participated in that culture anyway. If we want to understand why they did so, we need to do more than simply explore the ways in which contemporary discourses of virtue and rationality silenced women; it is necessary as well to examine some of the ways in which 'virtue' could mean something rather more complex to at least some women writers than we might be inclined to recognise today.

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REFERRING TO THIS ARTICLE

PERKINS, P. 'Planting Seeds of Virtue: Sentimental Fiction and the Moral Education of Women', *Cardiff Corvey: Reading the Romantic Text* 6 (June 2001). Online: Internet (date accessed): <http://www.cf.ac.uk/encap/corvey/articles/cc06_n02.html>.

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