EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY WOMEN

An Anthology

Bridget Hill

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EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY WOMEN

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BRIDGET HILL

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Eighteenth-Century Women: An Anthology

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Contents

General Introduction *page* 1

Part 1 Ideas of Female Perfection 16

Introduction 16
(a) Restraint and Modesty 18
(b) Submission and Compliance 20
(c) Piety 21
(d) Femininity 22

Part 2 And the Greatest of These Was Chastity 25

Introduction 25
(a) Chastity Preserved and Chastity Lost 28
(b) The Double Standard 31
(c) One Law for the Rich 34
(d) Prostitutes and Prostitution 38

Part 3 Female Education 44

Introduction 44
(a) The Intellectual Differences between the Sexes 49
(b) The Objectives of Female Education 52
(c) 'Learned Ladies' 56
(d) Accomplishments – Ornamental or Useful 57
(e) Novel-Reading 60
(f) Schooling for Daughters of the Rich 61
(g) Schooling for Daughters of the Poor 65

Part 4 Approaching Marriage 69

Introduction 69
(a) Parent–Daughter Relations and the Choice of a Husband 73
(b) Wooing and Courtship 76
(c) Motives for Marriage 80

Part 5 Marriage and After 89

Introduction 89
(a) The 'Forlorn State of Matrimony' 93
(b) A Sacred Institution? 96

(c) Regular, Clandestine and Irregular Marriage, and the Effects of Hardwicke's Marriage Act 97
(d) Childbirth 100
(e) Nursing and Child Care 104

Part 6 Women's Legal Position: Marriage Law and Custom 108

Introduction 108
(a) A Man-Made Law 110
(b) Married Women and the Law 112
(c) Separation and Divorce 113
(d) Customary Alternatives: Desertion and Bigamy 116
(e) Customary Alternatives: Wife Sale 118

Part 7 Women without Husbands 123

Introduction 123
(a) Spinsters and Dependants 125
(b) Widows 134

Part 8 Crime and Punishment 137

Introduction 137
(a) Breach of Promise, Seduction and Defamation of Character 140
(b) Rape 142
(c) Wife-Beating and Male Tyranny 143
(d) Confining Women to Mad-Houses – and to Prison 145
(e) Illegitimacy and Infanticide 148
(f) Other Crimes and their Punishment 150
(g) Women in Prison 152

Part 9 The Female Poor 156

Introduction 156
(a) Female Beggars 158
(b) How the Poor Lived and Died 159
(c) Poor Widows 163
(d) Making Ends Meet 168
(e) Unwanted Children 173
(f) The Settlement Laws 174

Part 10 Women and Agriculture 177

Introduction 177
(a) Farmers' Wives: their Contribution to the Family Income 181
(b) Their Declining Role 183
(c) Female Living-in Farm Servants 185
(d) Wives of Farm Labourers 187
(e) Gleaning: a Customary Right 191
(f) Immigrant Women in Agriculture and Market-Gardening around London 193
(g) Women's Wages in Agriculture 195

Part 11 Women in Industry and Other Occupations 197

Introduction 197
(a) The Woollen Industry 201
(b) Cotton and Other Textiles 205
(c) Lace and Straw Work 208
(d) Mines and Metal Industries 212
(e) Other Work for Women 216
(f) Employment Opportunities 222

Part 12 Female Domestic Servants 229

Introduction 229
(a) Sources of Supply of Female Domestic Servants 232
(b) Advice to Servants and their Mistresses 234
(c) Maid or Mistress? 238
(d) Hiring, Firing and Conditions of Service 240

Part 13 Women Protest 245

Introduction 245
(a) Women Challenge their Allotted Role 247
(b) Women Claim Equality 251
(c) Women Act 254

Bibliography 258

Index 265

General Introduction

Anthologies need some justification. This one was prompted by the growing realisation of just how little work had been done on women's history in the eighteenth century over the last fifty years. For anyone wanting to know something of women in this century, there remains very little in the way of easily accessible, primary source material and even less in the way of secondary. Yet today we are experiencing a period in which, in the most exciting way, the rise of the feminist movement has concentrated attention on women's history as never before. As a result there has been a re-examination of women's experience, past and present, and a fresh and critical reappraisal of the nature of women's role in society. There is now a great deal of work completed or in progress on many aspects of women's history, but still, for the most part, the eighteenth century in England is ignored. It is not surprising that the initial area on which attention has been focused has been the period of the women's suffrage movement – roughly speaking, the period from the middle of the nineteenth century, for the winning of the vote marked the passing of a major obstacle to women's emancipation. Yet it is surely curious that a period of history like the eighteenth century, which is so generally taught at both school and university, should remain very much male history and so largely ignore women.

It becomes curiouser when one starts to survey the work that has been done on eighteenth-century women. The only major study of working women in agriculture and industry, and covering only the second half of the century, is Ivy Pinchbeck's *Women Workers and the Industrial Revolution* published in 1930 and reprinted by Virago Press in 1981. It is a parallel work to Alice Clark's *Working Life of Women in the 17th Century* written as long ago as 1919. It would be easier to explain the relative absence of further work if these had been bad books. But they were not. Both were extremely thorough, scholarly surveys. Both are works that might have been expected to open up the two periods to further research. (Anyone starting to study eighteenth-century working women ignores Ivy Pinchbeck's book at their cost.) But further research failed to materialise – at least until recently, when after a gap of nearly half a century, work on seventeenth-century women is once more proceeding – in no small part stimulated by historians such as Keith Thomas.

In the case of the eighteenth century very little further work has

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been done. Why? On the whole, recent historians of the eighteenth century, whether political or economic, have been cautious if not conservative in outlook. Lewis Namier's work on *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III*, published in 1929, continued to dominate all work on eighteenth-century politics long after its publication. The debate between optimists and pessimists over whether or not the standard of living rose, fell or remained static in the period between 1770 and 1830 is an old one. In the early years of this century, the cause of the pessimists was perhaps most outstandingly exemplified by the work of the Hammonds, J. L. and B., in *The Village Labourer* (1911), *The Town Labourer* (1917) and *The Skilled Labourer* (1919). Their work came under attack when Professor Clapham (*An Economic History of Modern Britain* (1926), 1950, second preface and passim) queried the reliability of the sources on which the Hammonds had based their work. It was a debate that embraced many other contestants, but the final outcome was not merely to demote the work of the Hammonds but to demote social history in favour of much greater concentration by academic historians on economic history. The work of T. S. Ashton in its cool and dispassionate survey of the eighteenth-century economy is representative of this trend. As a contestant in the debate he concluded that, apart from some short-term dislocations as a result of which some temporary hardships were felt, developments were for the benefit of all.

The last thirty years have seen the production of a vast number of studies of the history of individual industries and trades. In some of these industries women are known to have played a role – on occasion a substantial one – yet not only do the indexes often omit any reference to women, but it would be quite possible to read the work and to conclude that women were in no way involved.

It would be very wrong, however, to leave the impression that no other contribution to the history of women in the eighteenth century had been made before the late 1960s when there was a marked revival of social history as an academically respectable subject. The work of Dorothy Marshall, M. Dorothy George, R. Bayne-Powell, Margaret Hewitt, D. Jarrett and Asa Briggs springs to mind and, in the field of literary studies, the work of such pioneers as Myra Reynolds, R. P. Utter and G. B. Needham. More recently there has been a great deal of work done on the family, on parenthood and childhood, on custom and folklore and, indeed, on women, sex and marriage – but even so relatively little of it has focused attention on the eighteenth century.

If there is now more work in progress on women's part in the social and industrial life of the eighteenth century, the contribu-

tion of British as against American historians remains small. Indeed, it is somewhat humiliating to discover the wealth of interest and enthusiasm that is now generated in American universities by the fertile field of women's history on this side of the Atlantic! Why is it that so far our feminist movement has generated so little interest in the eighteenth century? If the purpose of the study of women's history is to establish the ancestry of present-day feminism, then perhaps the eighteenth century has been found wanting. What feminism there was may have been seen as betraying far too many weaknesses and contradictions to be acknowledged. Of course, it all depends on what is seen as the purpose of women's history. It goes without saying that the vast majority of women in the eighteenth century were grossly under-privileged and wickedly exploited. In the face of such exploitation and the intolerable position women were expected to occupy, it is amazing that there were so many who heroically struggled against all their disadvantages to achieve so much. But the history of eighteenth-century women is sometimes anything but heroic. The vast majority of middle-class women unquestioningly conformed to the role assigned to them. If some were aware how restricting and limited was their prescribed role, and longed for more education, expanding employment opportunities and greater freedom, there were also those who were as brutal and scornful in their reaction to such nonconformity, wherever and whenever it showed itself, as the members of the other sex. If among labouring women, of whom we know all too little, there were those who protested against their exploitation, who pondered on a new and better world for the female poor, the brutalising conditions of many of their lives, and the desperate urgency of making a living ensured that they were but a small minority.

For us it requires an act of imagination to realise that in the eighteenth century by far the majority of the population lived in the countryside and were dependent for their livelihood on the land – if often supplemented by some secondary occupation. Towns were few and, with the exception of London, small. So only a minority of the total population were town-dwellers. The exception was London, already with a population of half a million before our century begins, expanding at a remarkable speed throughout the period and maintaining a dominance in economic, social and cultural life commensurate with its size.

One of the problems confronting any historian of women in the eighteenth century is the difficulty of making a comprehensive study of both 'women' and 'ladies'. In the course of the century, the gulf between the very rich and the very poor which had always existed, was extended by the rapid expansion of a socially con-

scious middle class at pains to distance themselves from those below them in the social hierarchy. As the process developed, points of contact between them seemingly diminish. Hence, perhaps, arises the tendency for recent work to concentrate on either 'ladies', or working 'women', but rarely on both. Yet this growing gulf and the reasons for it are of crucial importance for an understanding of the nature and course of development of the women's movement in the following century and, indeed, in this. That gulf was one of the consequences of the rapid changes in agriculture and industry that are associated with the period of the Industrial Revolution. Whether one accepts that label or not, the century certainly saw marked changes in the way of life of many of the population. The break comes somewhere between 1740 and 1780. By the end of the century, although the majority of the population were still country-dwellers, there were far more towns and a much larger degree of urbanisation. For women such changes had one major consequence. T. S. Ashton (*An Economic History of England: The 18th Century* (1955), 1972, p. 22) talked of 'an increased proportion of people' moving into 'the middle ranges' of society. Among farmers, tradesmen and skilled artisans, many, in the conditions of a growing population and an expanding home market, found themselves enjoying a far higher standard of life than earlier. With such higher standards went aspirations to a way of life for its womenfolk more in keeping with that of women of the upper classes. Such aspirations were accompanied by an increasing awareness of social class and what were regarded as fitting and seemly occupations for the class to which they aspired. It became more necessary sharply to differentiate one's own class from that below. One way to establish membership of the middle class was by the employment of domestic servants. The number you employed determined your exact social standing. Such social aspirations were to lead to a steady withdrawal from labour and a deliberate cultivation of a life of leisure. As Thomas Day put it, 'When once gentility begins there is an end to industry' (*Sandford and Merton*, 1786, Vol. 3, p. 303). It affected the wives of tradesmen who, said Defoe, 'Marry the tradesmen but scorn the trade' (*The Complete English Tradesman*, Vol. 1, from *The Novels and Miscellaneous Works*, 1840–1, Vol. 17, p. 216); it affected shopkeepers' wives who were no longer to be found in the shop; it transformed the wives of prospering farmers whose important functions on the farm and in marketing the farm produce, tended to decline.

It may well be that some middle-class women hated the drudgery of housework – and let us be under no illusion of just what drudgery eighteenth-century housework presented. Some

farmers' wives may well have resented the heavy burden of work the life of the farm imposed upon them. Had such increased leisure led to more and better education for women, if it had prompted the opening up of more employments or the use of their new leisure in interesting and fulfilling ways, it might have been different. But, in the majority of cases, the drudgery of housework or work on a farm was exchanged for leisure occupied by time-filling rather than productive pursuits so that many such women found their newly won leisure intolerably boring. It would seem, then, that the main motive, if not the only one behind their withdrawal from work, was aspirations to gentility in the women themselves, their husbands, or both.

Of course, much more was involved than the wishes of the women concerned. In agriculture there were the effects of enclosure and improved farming methods, the trend towards larger farms and more capitalist methods of farming, together with increasing agricultural specialisation, and more sophisticated marketing techniques with the moving in of the middlemen. Farm produce was now sent far greater distances than were involved when the local market was the focus of farms. The result was a steady erosion of those areas of farming – the dairy, butter- and cheese-making, the rearing of pigs and poultry, and the actual marketing of farm produce – in which women had traditionally played so central a role.

As tradesmen and artisans expanded their business they tended to employ more journeymen and apprentices so that the need for their wives' involvement in the business declined. Many such prospering men moved their homes away from their place of work. If it was a consolation for such tradesmen and artisans to have a home and a wife away from all association with their working lives, there were other reasons why they might welcome their wives no longer playing their former role in the business. It served to stress their gentility. It also concealed their financial position from a wife who might well be acquiring rather extravagant 'genteel' tastes.

The changes in agriculture that contributed to making the labour of farmers' wives no longer essential to the economy of the farm worked very differently for women of the labouring class. Many small farms had enjoyed a measure of self-sufficiency only because of the contribution made by their wives. Many could not afford any living-in servants so they were entirely dependent on their own families for labour. The main burden fell on the wife. Even wives of cottagers had been able to contribute significantly to the family economy by work on the cottage garden, by the use of common rights for keeping a few cows or sheep, and by collecting

fuel from the forests. The agricultural changes of the century meant that such small farmers, particularly tenant farmers, gradually disappeared, commons and wastes were whittled away by enclosure, many cottages were pulled down to prevent the possibility of their occupants becoming dependent on the parish. All women of the labouring classes suffered, but among those that suffered worst were widows and single women.

As farms got larger and farmers' wives less willing to take on the work involved in housing and feeding servants in husbandry, farmers came to depend on hiring labourers who lived in their own homes but who worked for wages, some few full-time but mostly for certain seasons, for weeks, or even days, of the year. Women could participate in this labour only if they were free from the cares of motherhood, could leave their children with a neighbour, or take their children with them. Even if the amount of such labour had remained the same, it was no longer as easy as earlier for women to carry on productive labour. In fact, for a period from sometime in the second half of the century probably until the early nineteenth century, the amount of agricultural labour open to women declined. Such a decline was not universal throughout the country nor did it happen at the same time in all areas. On the whole, in the east of England, the Home Counties and the Midlands, where there was specialisation on corn production, female labour declined. In the west and south where specialisation was on pastoral farming, women continued to play an important role. There was also a contrast between north and south. In the former, women continued to do farm work which further south was confined to men, and where there was far more restriction on the jobs in agriculture open to women.

Coupled with such developments in agriculture, which led to less productive work being available to women, went a decline in cottage industry, most notably in hand-spinning, the staple employment earlier for women and children throughout the country.

So, on the one hand, the developments of the century led to an increasing number of middle-class women totally divorced from labour – and where their choice of a life of gentility was a major contributory factor. On the other, the female labouring poor found that opportunities for labour were in decline and the consequent unemployment or underemployment was forced on them, not chosen.

Such an almost total alienation from labour among many middle-class women combined with an increasing class-consciousness, led to a polarisation of class differences. No longer were farmers' wives working alongside their milkmaids in the dairies, no longer were they living under the same roof as

labourers in husbandry, housing and feeding them as well as working alongside them. If formerly the farmer's family lived and ate in the kitchen alongside the servants employed, they now lived separately, with the family eating alone and living in the newly created parlours. Similarly, in trade and small workshops, no longer were women labouring beside the journeymen and apprentices. Even in the household, there was far less sharing of household tasks between mistress and maid.

One effect of the withdrawal from labour of all classes of women is the end of something approximating to a working partnership between husbands and wives. The implications of this change were different for different social groups, but in all cases what was almost certainly lost was a measure of equality with men. Of course, it was not real equality, but it came far nearer to it than was the experience of most women after the change. In agriculture the loss of women's ability to contribute to the achievement of a degree of self-sufficiency by combining work on a small plot of land – even only a cottage garden – with full use of such common rights as they had, a little seasonal labour on larger neighbouring farms and some spinning or weaving in the home, meant the end of what Professor Malcolmson has called the 'economy of self-reliance' (see *Life and Labour in England 1700–1780*, 1981, p. 24). Whether or not they earned money they were able, by engaging in productive labour, to make their contribution to the household income. Their awareness of their ability to make such a contribution must have had a profound psychological effect and been a source of self-respect and dignity. The loss of that ability meant their only role became that of domestic drudges. The Society for Bettering the Condition and Increasing the Comforts of the Poor was to comment on the problem when, in a report of 1806, it said: 'The wife is no longer able to contribute her share towards the weekly expenses . . . In a kind of despondency she sits down, unable to contribute anything to the general fund of the family and conscious of rendering no other service to her husband except that of the mere care of his family.'

One of the advantages of cottage industry shared by the wives of farmers and smallholders was the compatibility of the work with staying at home, looking after the children, and coping with the housework. It could always be used as a source of supplementing income just as could seasonal work in hay-making and harvest. But, of course, it also suited the employers because the very fact that wages were regarded as supplementary enabled them to pay lower, and sometimes much lower, wages to the women than to the men.

Where mechanisation of industrial processes led to the growth

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