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Eighteenth-Century Female Voices

Education and the Novel

TRIERER STUDIEN ZUR LITERATUR

42

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Europäischer Verlag der Wissenschaften

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Bibliographic Information published by Die Deutsche Bibliothek
Die Deutsche Bibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data is available in the internet at <http://dnb.ddb.de>.

Zugl.: Trier, Univ., Diss., 2004

D 385
ISSN 0721-4294
ISBN 3-631-52914-7
US-ISBN 0-8204-7373-1

Printed in Germany 1 2 3 4 5 7

www.peterlang.de

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TRIERER STUDIEN ZUR LITERATUR

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Bd./Vol. 42

PETER LANG
Frankfurt am Main · Berlin · Bern · Bruxelles · New York · Oxford · Wien

ABSTRACT

This work focuses on the issue of women's education in a series of novels written by women in the second half of the eighteenth century: namely Eliza Haywood, *The History of Miss Betsy Thoughtless* (1751), Charlotte Lennox, *The Female Quixote* (1752), Frances Sheridan, *The Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph* (1761), Frances Burney, *Evelina; or, The History of a Young Lady's Entrance into the World* (1778), Elizabeth Inchbald, *A Simple Story* (1791), Ann Radcliffe, *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), Mary Hays, *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* (1796), and two works by Mary Wollstonecraft, *Mary. A Fiction* (1788) and *The Wrongs of Woman; or, Maria. A Fragment* (1798). Most of these writers, whose works were bestsellers when first published, were subsequently almost forgotten, until rediscovered in the twentieth century thanks to the work of feminist literary historians and critics. After giving first a historical perspective on the origins of gender stereotypes and their justification of the limited education available to women, the introduction then delineates the socio-cultural context in which these women were writing by looking at the consequences of the stereotypical sex-roles and the status of middle-class women in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries in England. Using the techniques of New Historicism, the culture of 'proper' female behaviour is explored in author-based chapters arranged chronologically with reference to conduct books, sermons, and role models of the period. It is argued that, while the new genre of the novel offered women an enlargement of the scope of discourse by allowing them to explore their female experiences in new ways, generally they remained within the boundaries prescribed by established male literary tradition.

By exploring the dialogic exchange between these novels and 'courtesy literature' of the time and examining the ways in which these novels present the results of inadequate female education, what can be called their double-voicedness is highlighted. On the one hand, the surface plots are conservative, thus reaffirming the social order; on the other hand, numerous subversive narrative techniques undermine the surface stories, drawing attention to the consequences of the arbitrary limitations society imposed on middle-class women as well as to the sense of entrapment and the resulting anxieties they experienced. In showing the increasing female readership ways to negotiate between the behavioural codes of a patriarchal society and their own need for personal freedom, these novels can be read as early feminist critiques of society.

Together with Mary Hays, one of the women novelists discussed in this study, I would like to admit that 'by the well-informed critic, it may be alleged, that but little new is brought forward in this work. Yet that novelty is more rare than the vulgar imagine, it is unnecessary to hint to the learned'. Like Mary Hays's intention in *Female Biography*

> my design was, not [...] to astonish by profound research, but to collect and concentrate, in one interesting point of view, those [...] striking circumstances, that may answer a better purpose than the gratification of a vain curiosity. [...] If I have failed of attaining my purpose, I shall receive with patience, nay more, with thankfulness, the corrections of the candid and experienced critic.[1]

[1] Mary Hays, *Female Biography; or, Memoirs of Illustrious and Celebrated Women, of all Ages and Countries,* 6 vols (London: Richard Phillips, 1803), I, pp. vii-viii.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I should like to express my deepest gratitude to Professor Dr Horst Breuer, Professor of English Literature at the University of Trier, Germany, for his confidence in me. Throughout the preparation I profited from his judicious and informed comments on my ideas. His encouragement and support, also in helping me procure secondary literature not available at either the University Library in Trier or the Bibliothèque Nationale in Luxembourg, have been invaluable.

I would like to add that the present dissertation developed out of an MA dissertation. My personal tutor at the time was Dr Barbara Morden. Her constant feedback as well as her meticulous comments were immensely helpful. I am grateful for her encouragement and support.

CONTENTS

I. INTRODUCTION

New Historicism developed in the late 1970s in response to perceived excesses of New Criticism, which tended to ignore the importance of the historical context of a work of art. As with traditional historical criticism, New Historicists argue that texts cannot be separated from their historical context. But unlike traditional historicists, 'New Historicism rejects both the notion that literary texts can "reflect" historical conditions, and also that there is any single essential historical narrative about which literature can itself directly speak'.[1] Each text is only one example of many types of historical discourse. To understand a literary text best, the literary scholar should look at all sorts of other texts of the time. Thus New Historicists investigate the socio-historical context in which authors were working and in which their works were received. The New Historicist investigates how a literary text is part of an historical situation and the ways in which other historical 'texts' – artefacts, documents, events – can help us to understand the literary productions of the time.

Feminist criticism has many different concerns, but above all it is interested in how power is distributed between genders, and in who is excluded and marginalised. However, 'feminist criticism is also concerned with writing by women'.[2] This feminist critical approach has led to investigation of canon formation within the patriarchy, and it does not come as a great surprise that the list of women writers and their works is much more abundant than the established canon would have the reader believe. As early as 1752, George Ballard exposed the injustice of this approach, which motivated him to write *Memoirs of Several Ladies of Great Britain:*

> The present age [...] has produced a greater number of excellent biographers than any preceding times; and yet, I know not how it has happened that very many ingenious women of this nation, who were really possessed of a great share of learning and have, no doubt, in their time been famous for it, are not only unknown to the public in general, but have

[1] Martin Graham, 'New Historicism', in *A Handbook to Literary Research*, ed. by Simon Eliot and W.R. Owens (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 150-151 (p. 150).

[2] Richard Allen, 'Literature, Gender, Feminist Criticism', in *A Handbook to Literary Research*, ed. by Simon Eliot and W.R. Owens (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 117-130 (p. 118).

> been passed by in silence by our greatest biographers.[3]

Moreover, feminists are strongly conscious that most texts were male-authored and consequently female characters are constructed as passive objects: 'Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands',[4] says Jane Austen's heroine, Anne Elliot. This posits 'the need to become resisting readers, to learn to read against the grain'[5] in an endeavour to understand the 'double-voicedness' of texts by early women writers and recover their unrecorded and alternative message. Accordingly, literary scholars have begun to read old texts in new ways and have discovered their subtext.

One way of understanding women's experience in society is through the concept of 'gendering'. Gender can be seen as a matter of culture, that is to say socially learned behaviours and attitudes, associated with, and expected of, men or women. In western culture the male is regarded as the norm from which the female is a departure.[6] Patriarchy defines the masculine as active, rational, unemotional, and brave within the public sphere, whereas positions centring around dependency, family concerns, and the domestic are traditionally associated with women. As a logical consequence of this gender construct, women have been assigned a subordinate role not only in society, but also in marriage and the family, in itself a microcosm supposed to reflect the order of the body politic. These unequal gender roles are deeply embedded in western culture.

The roots of this misogynist attitude can be followed deep into antiquity. The Greek philosopher Aristotle (384-322 BC) already considered the male principle superior to the female principle: consequently men should rule, both in the State and in the household. However, Aristotle's teacher Plato (?428-?348 BC) had suggested the same education for both men and women in his *Republic*: a utopian vision unfortunately, as in real life female subordination was the norm.

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[3] George Ballard, *Memoirs of Several Ladies of Great Britain Who Have Been Celebrated for Their Writings or Skill in the Learned Languages*, Arts and Sciences, 1752, repr., ed. and intro. by Ruth Perry (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1985), p. 53.

[4] Jane Austen, *Persuasion*, ed. and intro. by D.W. Harding (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), p. 237. See also Chapter III, footnote 54, p. 73.

[5] Pam Morris, *Literature and Feminism: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), p. 29.

[6] On gender stereotyping see Simone de Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième Sexe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976); Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (London: Methuen, 1985); Pamela Morris, *Literature and Feminism: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995); Michael McKeon, 'Historicizing Patriarchy: The Emergence of Gender Difference in England, 1660-1760', *ECS*, 28 (1994-95), 295-322.

The creation narrative of *Genesis* further influenced the general attitude towards women: the creation of Eve out of Adam in Chapter 1 was seen as a proof of her subordination. Chapter 2 with its tale of temptation and subsequent Fall burdened women with the guilt of original sin. It is an argument which Sarah Grimké exposed in the following words: 'Adam's ready acquiescence with his wife's proposal, does not savor much of that superiority in *strength of mind*, which is arrogated by man'.[7] These are roughly the traditions which formed the basis of medieval thought establishing the female as both flawed and subordinate to the male. The image of woman as Temptress was strengthened during the Restoration by the loose behaviour of women of higher ranks at the court of Charles II and codified within an alternative Puritan culture. This, together with what Janet Todd calls the 'medical revolution'[8] of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, led to trivialization. Women's smaller body was considered the external sign of a smaller brain, that is to say an emotional rather than an intellectual equipment rendering them incapable of intellectual activity. Women's inferiority was taken for absolute scientific fact and it was generally believed that their minds would collapse under the strain of learning.

The eighteenth century was a period of major political and economic change which led to an increasing demarcation of gender categories and social roles. Emerging capitalism split society into two worlds: the public world of business and social interchange, and the private world of the family, leading to the creation of a public and a private sphere. Woman belonged at home, raising the children, and catering to the needs of her husband. A wealthy merchant's wife could afford to employ servants and so the leisured wife became a symbol of male success. As a result, middle-class women were increasingly marginalized. Furthermore, there was the phenomenon of social mobility, especially where women were concerned, and which Richardson illustrates so well in *Pamela*.[9] As England moved from a hierarchical society to one with a thriving middle class, women in particular were afforded the possibility of moving themselves up in social status, usually in exchange for a liberal dowry paid over to a man of aristocratic birth.[10]

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[7] Sarah Grimké, *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes addressed to Mary S. Parker, President of the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society*, 1837, at (http://www.pinn.net/~sunshine/book-sum/grimke3.html), p. 4.

[8] *Female Education in the Age of Enlightenment*, intro. by Janet Todd, 6 vols (London: William Pickering, 1996), I, pp. vii-xxiii (p. xiii). All further references to this introduction cited in chapter as 'Todd, in *Female Education*, I'.

[9] Samuel Richardson, *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded* (1740-41).

[10] On the eighteenth-century social background see for example G.M. Trevelyan, *English Social History: A Survey of Six Centuries from Chaucer to Queen Victoria* (London:

According to the conformist view, women's primary occupation was to please men, which explained why they tended to elaborate hairdressing, expensive clothing and the use of cosmetics. At the same time, they were discouraged from much physical activity and the ensuing weakness was another proof of their inferiority. The eighteenth-century fashion of tight-lacing led to frequent fainting fits, which helped to create the image of the weak woman.

Since women of middle rank did not usually have a career as such and were not 'citizens' in the sense of being involved in politics, there was no perceived need for intellectual development. Women's education was generally confined to the three Rs and in view of their 'natural destiny', that is marriage, they were trained in household duties and accomplishments – music, sketching, dancing, perhaps a modern language. As Lady Pennington writes in 1761: '*French* you ought to be as well acquainted with as with *English*: – and *Italian* might, without much difficulty, be added'.[11] Even on this issue of language learning conduct book writers disagreed. Thus Madame de Lambert agreed that '[w]omen are ready enough to learn Italian', but she thought the trend dangerous, because 'it is the language of love'.[12] In her opinion 'though a woman ought to be satisfied with speaking that [the language] of her own country, I should not thwart the inclination one might have for Latin. It is the language of the Church'.[13] This attitude was in complete agreement with Fénelon's, published some fifty years earlier:

> It is usually assumed that a well-brought up lady of quality should study Italian and Spanish. [...] These two languages only enable them to read dangerous books, which can only augment women's shortcomings: there is more to be lost than gained from such a study. The study of Latin would be

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Longman, 1965); Douglas Hay and Nicholas Rogers, *Eighteenth-Century English Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

[11] Lady Sarah Pennington, *An Unfortunate Mother's Advice to her Absent Daughters*, 1761, repr. (New York and London: Garland, 1986), pp. 26-27. All further references to this edition cited in chapter as 'Pennington, *Advice*'.

[12] Marchioness de Lambert, 'Advice of a Mother to Her Daughter', 1727, in *The Young Lady's Pocket Library; or, Parental Monitor*, 1790, repr., intro. by Vivien Jones (England: Thoemmes Press, 1995), pp. 133-185 (p. 156). All further references to this text cited in chapter as 'de Lambert, *Advice*'.

[13] de Lambert, *Advice*, p. 155.

> much more sensible as it is the language of the Church.[14]

One of the most praised accomplishments was needlework, which 'has been in all ages highly instrumental to the preservation of female virtue and happiness'.[15] Intellectual education reserved for males was thought to make women unfit as wives: 'Heavens, Mr Courtney! You will spoil all her feminine graces; knowledge and learning, are insufferably masculine in a woman – born only for the soft solace of man!',[16] comment some of Mr Courtney's friends on the education of his daughter in Mary Hays's *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* in 1796. Giving women only the most superficial education was instrumental in bringing them to accept their subordination. Most influential in propagating the construction of the submissive middle-class lady were conduct books, sermons, and periodicals.

Periodicals such as *The Tatler* (1709-11) or *The Spectator* (1711-12) offered instruction in all areas of social, domestic, and professional behaviour. The trend was moralizing and thus they largely contributed to refining the manners of their contemporaries, especially those of the female reader. James Fordyce in particular established himself as an arbiter of women's reading habits. In 1766 he writes:

> I must not omit to recommend those admirable productions of the present century, which turn principally on the two great hinges of sentiment and character; joining description to precept, and presenting in particular the most animated sketches of modern manners, where the likeness is caught warm from life; while the powers of fancy, wit, and judgement, combine to expose vice and folly, to enforce reformation, and in short but spirited essays to convey the rules of domestic wisdom and daily

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[14] [My translation: 'On croit d'ordinaire qu'il faut qu'une fille de qualité qu'on veut bien élever apprenne l'italien et l'espagnol. [...] Ces deux langues ne servent guère qu'à lire des livres dangereux, et capables d'augmenter les défauts des femmes: il y a beaucoup plus à perdre qu'à gagner dans cette étude. Celle du latin serait bien plus raisonable, car c'est la langue de l'Eglise'.] François de Salignac de la Mothe-Fénelon, *De l'Education des Filles*, 1687, at (http://un2sg4.unige.ch/athena/fenelon/fen_fi_frame3.html), chap. XII, p. 3.

[15] Catherine Macaulay, 'Letters on Education', 1790, in *Female Education in the Age of Enlightenment*, intro. by Janet Todd, 6 vols (London: William Pickering, 1996), III, 'Letter VI', pp. 64-65. All further references to this edition cited in chapter as 'Macaulay, *Letters*'.

[16] Mary Hays, *Memoirs of Emma Courtney*, ed. and intro. by Eleanor Ty (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 22-23.

> conduct. I need not here name the Spectator, or those who have followed him with various success in the same track; many of them ingenious, some of them masterly writers. How much are both sexes indebted to their elegant pens, for a species of instruction better fitted perhaps than most others of human device, to delight and improve at the same moment; such is its extent, its diversity, its familiarity, its ease, its playful manner, its immediate reference to scenes and circumstances with which we are every day conversant![17]

Steele, author and editor of *The Spectator*, seems to have relished his paper's reputation as providing a genteel education of ladies: 'I shall take it for the greatest Glory of my Work, if among reasonable Women this Paper may furnish *Tea-Table Talk*',[18] and criticized the tendency to consider a woman educated if she were taught drawing-room decorum and pretty feminine graces: '[T]he Management of a young Lady's Person is not to be overlooked, but the Erudition of her Mind is much more to be regarded'.[19] His own contribution to the education of the female mind was a 'Ladies Library', a three-volume treatise, repeatedly mentioned and eventually published in 1714. But despite this seeming open-mindedness, Steele's idea of the social role of woman was in agreement with that of his age: 'All she has to do in this World, is contain'd within the Duties of a Daughter, a Sister, a Wife, and a Mother'.[20]

The Spectator inspired many magazines for women, such as Eliza Haywood's *The Female Spectator* (1744-47), Frances Brooke's *The Old Maid* (started in 1753), Charlotte Lennox's *The Lady's Museum* (1760-61) and *The Lady's Magazine*; *or, Entertaining Companion for the Fair Sex*, which was one of the most enduring: it first appeared in 1770 and was to run for seventy-seven years. Following directly in the footsteps of Addison and Steele, Eliza Haywood edited *The Female Spectator* (1744-47),[21] generally considered to be the first magazine by a woman and for women. It was a fictionalized form of advice

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[17] James Fordyce, in *Female Education in the Age of Enlightenment*, intro. by Janet Todd, 6 vols (London: William Pickering, 1996), I, 'Sermon VII', pp. 279-80. All further references to this edition cited in chapter as 'Fordyce, *in Female Enlightenment*, I'.

[18] *Spectator 4*, 5 March 1711, in *The Spectator: A New Edition*, ed., intro., and notes by Henry Morley (London: Routledge, 1891), p. 11. All further references to this edition cited in chapter as 'Morley'.

[19] *Spectator 66*, 16 May 1711, in Morley, p. 109.

[20] *Spectator 342*, 2 April 1712, in Morley, p. 499.

[21] See also Chapter II, pp. 40-41.

literature, which exposed some of the consequences of transgressing the rules of social conduct:

> She is tireless in warning her readers of the rigid requirements of social decorum, the preciousness of a good reputation, the artifices of men, and the pitfalls which await the young and the unwary in a predatory society.[22]

But Haywood's main concern throughout her essays is education:

> Were that Time which is taken up in instructing us in Accomplishments, [...] employ'd in studying the Rules of Wisdom, in well informing us what we are, and what we ought to be, it would doubtless inspire those, to whom we should happen to be united, with a Reverence which would not permit them to treat us with that Lightness and Contempt.[23]

And she continues by exposing the causes of this mistaken behaviour:

> Yet, I think, it would be cruel to charge the Ladies with all the Errors they commit; it is most commonly the Fault of a wrong Education, which makes them frequently do amiss, while they think they not only act innocently but uprightly; - it is therefore only the Men, and Men of Understanding too, who, in effect, merit the Blame of this, and are answerable for all the Misconduct we are guilty of: - Why do they call us *silly Women*, and not endeavour to make us otherwise?[24]

Haywood tries to make her point diplomatically: 'Would not themselves [men] reap the Benefit of our Amendment? Should we not be more obedient Daughters, more faithful Wives, more tender Mothers, more sincere Friends, and

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[22] Robert D. Mayo, *The English Novel in the Magazines, 1740-1815* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 92.

[23] Mary R. Mahl and Helene Koon, eds, *The Female Spectator: English Women Writers before 1800* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977), p. 230. All further references to this edition cited in chapter as 'Mahl, *Female Spectator*'.

[24] Eliza Haywood, *The Female Spectator*, ed. by Patricia Meyer Spacks (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), Book X, p. 123.

more valuable in every other Station of Life?'.[25] This concept of a magazine addressing a predominantly female readership was not new, however. A serial publication entitled *The Lady's Mercury* had appeared as early as 1693. From 1709 to 1710 *The Female Tatler* appeared thrice weekly, on days alternating with Addison's and Steele's *Tatler*.[26]

For centuries conduct books helped shape the concept of the 'gentlewoman' and changing notions of femininity. The majority of books of advice from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance provided instruction for the courtier, but then books of advice increasingly addressed the female sex. Famous seventeenth-century examples are Richard Allestree's *The Ladies Calling* (1673) and Lord Halifax's *The Lady's New-Year's Gift; or, Advice to a Daughter* (1688). The latter was enormously popular for almost a century, running through at least fourteen editions. In eighteenth-century England, when increased prosperity of the middle classes rendered the wife's labour unnecessary and a leisured wife became a status symbol, the production of such books was accelerated. The date of Lord Chesterfield's *Letters* to this Son (1774) is often taken as the culminating point in studies of courtesy literature for men and marks at the same time the beginning of an accelerated production of courtesy books for women:[27]

> English literature, unrivalled in almost every other department, can likewise boast the greatest number, that any country ever produced, of excellent works of this nature; to which we may, perhaps, justly attribute the stricter morality, observed among the Britons of liberal education, compared with similar classes in other kingdoms, — the superior modesty, elegance, and worth, which so eminently distinguish the British female character.[28]

The general objective of this conduct literature was to define femininity in terms of role and value. The qualities recommended were those which characterized the ideal woman in terms of

> meekness, submissiveness, chastity, modesty, physical frailty, reserve, delicacy, affection,

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[25] Mahl, *Female Spectator*, p. 227.

[26] For an account of the development of women's magazines see Cynthia L. White, *Women's Magazines, 1693-1968* (London: Michael Johnson, 1970).

[27] Joyce Hemlow, 'Fanny Burney and the Courtesy Books', *PMLA*, 65 (1950), 732–761 (p. 732).

[28] Pennington, *Advice*, p. vi.