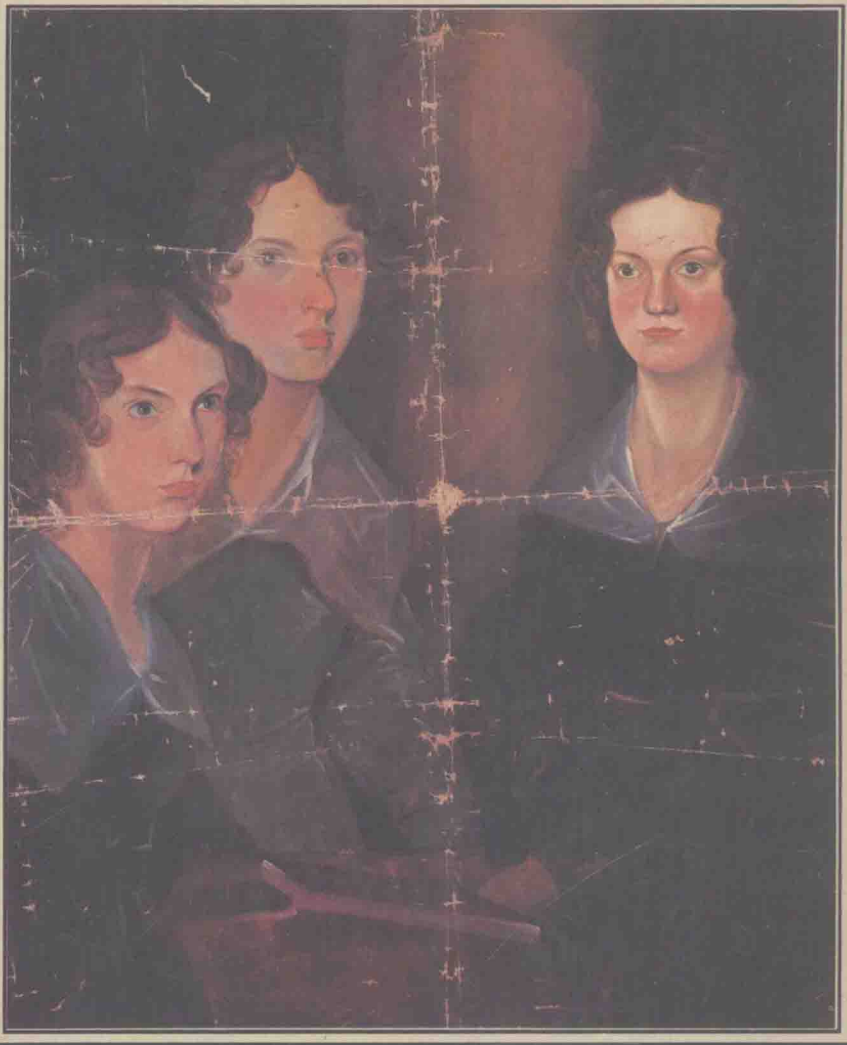
SEX & SUBTERFUGE

Women Writers to 1850



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Introduction

THROUGHOUT the eighteenth century women had been writing popular novels, largely for the consumption of other women, and both production and consumption were viewed with considerable contempt by the superior sex. But during the last decade of the eighteenth century a change took place: women began to write novels with a skill and authority which commanded the respect of both sexes, and over the next fifty years they colonised the medium and made it their own. They took over the novel in England, gave it a new shape, structure and unity of intention which was to have a lasting impact to this day. If there is such a thing as the classical novel in English literature, and I think there is, then women were responsible for defining and refining it.

The novel which women took over from men towards the end of the eighteenth century was a bulky, amorphous affair. Virginia Woolf, in *A Room of One's Own*, expressed the hope that women writers would, in the future, write novels which were rather shorter than those of men. Her own novels are certainly a good deal shorter than those of Joyce, Proust or Mann. But if she had looked at the history of the novel to her own time she would have realised that most women have tended to value brevity. *Evelina*, although an epistolary novel, is much shorter than anything by Richardson; Austen pruned and polished *Pride and Prejudice* for years before she sent it off to a publisher; Charlotte Brontë, making notes for a possible first novel while a student teacher in Brussels, reminded herself to 'Avoid Richardsonian multiplication' and aim for 'As much compression – as little explanation as may be'.[1] On the whole the best of women's fiction tends to be short and compressed, certainly compared with the best output by male writers. George Eliot, writing at the peak of the Victorian era, building on the groundwork done by earlier women writers and competing against male professionalism in a way that Austen or the Brontës or even Mrs Gaskell had never done, did go in for bulk.

But George Eliot's structures were still basically female structures, an elaboration of what the best women writers had done in the sixty or seventy years before she began to write. The typical male structure

was inherited from Fielding: it was linear, episodic and picaresque. The hero moved from adventure to adventure, scene to scene, characters popped up and then vanished for an age; often there were tales told by a peripheral character within the main narrative. It is a technique aptly satirised in Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, where much is said but the hero never even suceeds in getting himself born.

This is the male mode taken over and adapted by Dickens and to some extent by Thackeray. It lends itself to serial publication, particularly when the aim is to get as much financial gain as possible from one storyline, and also to spin it out. 'There are superb passages in it; but what defective composition!' Flaubert wrote to George Sand after reading *Pickwick Papers*, perhaps not a fair example, although Dickens simply developed that early technique. Flaubert goes on to comment: 'All English writers are the same; Walter Scott excepted, all lack a plot. That is unendurable for us Latins.'[2] Not only Walter Scott, but every woman writer between Austen and Eliot must also be excepted.

Bulk in England has tended to be associated with committed professionalism and the need or wish for financial gain. The women who wrote long novels at this period tended to be women who turned to writing as a means of gaining an independent existence, Charlotte Smith, for instance, Mrs Radcliffe, and the later Fanny Burney. Financial considerations were also important to George Eliot once she was established as a novelist and could give up literary hack work. But women writers, the best of them, seem never to have lost sight of the need for aesthetic integrity, the need to see a novel as a whole. While Dickens and Thackeray wrote chapter by chapter to a deadline for serial publication, Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot refused to be published in this way because it was clearly damaging to the idea of the novel as a whole. When Mrs Gaskell was lured into serial publication by Dickens she refused to adapt or compromise in the way serial publication demanded, and cost Dickens many of the readers he had been assiduously wooing with his own work.

It is the intention of this book to examine the literary progress of women novelists during this key period in their emergence from the shadows of obscurity. We are so used to thinking of the 'disadvantages' of women (if we are women) and the 'inferiority' of women (if we are men) that it might come as a surprise to both to find a situation where disadvantages turned out to be advantages and the supposedly inferior sex showed itself to be unexpectedly superior.

1. Background for Change

WHY was it that both the quantity and quality of fiction written by women increased so significantly towards the end of the eighteenth century? To find some of the answers we have to look at the social changes taking place.

Women novelists came from the social classes who could indulge in the luxury of educating their daughters. Maria Edgeworth and Jane Austen were born into the gentry, Fanny Burney's father was an intellectual and middle-class member of an urban elite. For the upper classes in England the latter half of the eighteenth century was a period of increasing wealth and leisure. Life became more civilised and refined. It was a period during which the women of these classes in particular had more leisure, when their many domestic duties were taken over by servants or outside labour and they had far more time for leisure pursuits or self-improvement.

In addition, women of these classes were better educated than they had ever been before. 'All our ladies read now, which is a great extension', commented Dr Johnson in 1778.[1] Indeed, in some respects young women were arguably getting a better education than their privileged brothers, who were sent off to schools which gave them a rigid classical education, to be followed perhaps by the even narrower disciplines involved in preparing for a life in the Church or at the Bar. By the late eighteenth century the curriculum in girls' boarding schools not only covered the traditional female accomplishments, such as music, dancing, drawing and needlework, but also taught writing, grammar, arithmetic, geography and history, French and current affairs. 'Boys at grammar school,' remarked Mrs Eliza Fox, 'are taught Latin and Greek, despise the simpler paths of learning, and are generally ignorant of really useful matters of fact, about which a girl is much better informed.'[2]

By the end of the eighteenth century there was a consensus of opinion on the ideal education for women from the landed classes and the upper bourgeoisie. She was not frivolous, but neither was she a blue-stocking who threatened men on their own ground by being educated in the classics. She was sufficiently well-informed to make

an agreeable companion for her husband and to educate her young children in the early years. Among the Bennet sisters in *Pride and Prejudice* Mary the blue-stocking represents one undesirable extreme, giddy Kitty and Lydia the other, whilst Jane and Elizabeth, as the plot proves, are admirably equipped to make desirable wives for the landed gentry.

Women of these social classes were not, of course, expected or educated to earn their own living or follow a profession of any sort. They were educated purely and simply to meet the rising expectations of domestic life. But as it happened, a high proportion of women from these classes remained unmarried at this period, and the sort of education they received was far from being unsuitable for an embryo novelist.

One of the reasons that Richardson, writing in the mid-eighteenth century, chose to identify with heroines rather than heroes in his novels, was the fact that, as a relatively humble printer, he had not had the benefit of a classical education. While Fielding and Smollett took over the picaresque novel as it had been developed by Cervantes and made use of classical allusions in their work, Richardson was very much aware of his limitations in being able to read only works which had appeared in English, something that put him 'down among the women', who were writing romances and despised domestic novels. It was a situation that put him very much on the defensive, and in *Sir Charles Grandison* he, not unnaturally, minimises the value of a classical education. Harriet Byron thinks the value of Latin is over-rated, while Miss Clements remarks drily that 'Something . . . should be left for *men* to excel in.' But it is of course a man who delivers the definitive words of wisdom and judgement. Mr Reeves, brought in as arbitrator in the discussion, first reads a quotation which begins: 'I have often thought it a great error to waste young gentlemen's years so long in learning Latin' and goes on to say that 'there is much noble knowledge to be had in the English and French languages: geography, history, chiefly that of our own country, the knowledge of nature, and the more *practical* parts of the mathematics . . . may make a gentleman very knowing, though he has not a word of Latin.' And then adds: 'And why, I would fain know, not a gentlewoman?' quoting Locke as an authority to prove that female education is a good thing.[3]

When Richardson's novel came out in 1753 the subject of women's education was still controversial, but by the end of the century it was widely accepted that a non-specific, general education of this kind was

a good thing for gentlewomen. It must be emphasised that, for all his sympathies, Richardson was no feminist. The rider added by his spokesman Mr Reeves was to hold good for many decades to come:

> Be not therefore, ladies, ashamed either of your talents or acquirements. Only take care you give not up any knowledge that is more laudable in your sex, and more useful, for learning; and then I am sure you will, you *must*, be the more agreeable, the more suitable companions for it, to men of sense.

Although the education of women as wives and mothers may seem inadequate to us, it was nevertheless an important beginning. It raised the status of women, so that men no longer regarded them as mere breeders and domestic drudges. And, once the process of education has begun, it is unstoppable. A taste of knowledge inevitably breeds a hunger for more.

Until the eighteenth century marriage, like life, had tended to be brutish and short. In upper class families, indeed, in any families which owned property to be passed down, marriages were arranged, and affection between the partners was not a serious consideration. The death rate was such that most marriages were anyhow of short duration, and since children were liable to die young there was no strong affective bond between parents and children either. But by the mid-eighteenth century there had been a great improvement in health and domestic hygiene, and upper-class homes were more airy and spacious than they had ever been before. Women and children had a greater life expectancy, and wives were relieved from the traditional domestic chores – industrial processes had removed some of them, and servants took care of the rest. As a result families had more time, both for leisure pursuits and for each other. The ideal of domestic affection was now seen as a prime goal in life for both men and women, and for the landed gentry, where the husband did not have to follow a profession and stay away from home for long periods, it was an achievable goal. Fielding portrayed this ideal as early as 1742 in *Joseph Andrews*. Mr Wilson, who turns out to be the hero's long lost father, portrays a life-style which Joseph himself is destined to follow when he marries his Fanny:

> . . . we are seldom asunder during the residue of the day . . . for I am neither ashamed of conversing with my wife nor of playing with my children: to say the truth, I do not perceive that inferiority

> of understanding which the levity of rakes, the dulness of men of business, or the austerity of the learned, would persuade us of in women. As for my woman, I declare I have found none of my own sex capable of making juster observations on life, or of delivering them more agreeably; nor do I believe any one possessed of a faithfuller or braver friend. And sure as this friendship is sweetened with more delicacy and tenderness, so it is confirmed by dearer pledges than can attend the closest male alliance; for what union can be so fast as our common interest in the fruits of our embraces?[4]

The ideal of companionate marriage portrayed from the time of Fielding to the time of Edgeworth and Austen was essentially based on the country life enjoyed by the landed gentry, where co-operation and companionship between husband and wife was still a real possibility. A century later the bourgeois novel typically portrayed a situation where domestic harmony was threatened by the husband's professional commitments and the wife's isolation in the home.

If husbands and wives were to be companions they clearly had to have some liking for each other, some affinity or sympathy. Mr Wilson speaks of friendship, and affection rather than passionate love was thought to be the proper basis of marriage. Although considerations of property were still important, it was generally felt that, as long as a couple had enough to live on comfortably, affection rather than fortune should govern choice in marriage.

For a time, a favourite theme in fiction was a conflict of interests between parents, who wanted their children to marry for gain, and children who wanted to marry for love. In 1749 Fielding set out the two views of marriage in *Tom Jones*, where Squire Western is determined to marry his daughter to a rich man of his choice, whilst Squire Allworthy thinks that love should be the foundation of marriage. The honourable compromise of the time, which is the position taken by Sophia, is that she will marry a man of her choice, but not without her father's consent. Innumerable novels would revolve on the withholding of parental consent, whilst the possibility of marriage for love led women to dreams of upward mobility through marriage, dreams rather unwholesomely fostered by fiction.

But writers of the eighteenth century drew a clear distinction between affection based on knowledge and judgement, and sexual

desire, which was definitely thought to be a very bad reason for marriage, one of the reasons Fielding poured such scorn on *Pamela*. In his parody *Shamela* (1741) he wrote:

> The character of Shamela will make young gentlemen wary how they take the most fatal step both to themselves and families, by youthful, hasty, and improper matches; indeed, they may assure themselves that all such prospects of happiness are vain and delusive, and that they sacrifice all the solid comforts of their lives, to a very transient satisfaction of a passion, which how hot so ever it be, will be soon cooled; and when cooled, will afford them nothing but repentance. . . . Young gentlemen are here taught, that to marry their mother's chambermaids, and to indulge the passion of lust, at the expense of reason and common sense, in an act of religion, virtue, and honour; and, indeed, the surest road to happiness.

Certainly *Pamela* is a rather extreme tale of a woman's upward mobility through marriage. Most humble maidens who look too high are riding for a fall.

Given this new freedom, and its attendant pitfalls, the selection of a marriage partner who was both suitable and lovable was bound to become a dominant theme in fiction, and one to which women writers and readers particularly addressed themselves. After all, for a woman it was the single most important choice of a lifetime, very often the only moment of choice, and much more depended on her decision, for good or ill, than could ever be the case for a man. Her whole future happiness depended on attracting and choosing the right man. And, given the new freedom from parental authority, guilt and self-reproach were an added ingredient in the misery that followed a misguided choice. No wonder so many women writers addressed themselves to the problem with such didactic fervour.

But by the middle of the eighteenth century many upper-class women never married. During the eighteenth century there was a high proportion of lifelong bachelors amongst the younger sons of the nobility and gentry, who could not afford to get married and still maintain their life-style. Property arrangements had become very rigid, estates were entailed, and younger sons were now pushed out into the world with a small annuity and some hope of advancement

through patronage. If they went into one of the professions it might take many years before they accumulated enough capital to maintain a household in the style to which they were accustomed by birth.

The proportion of sons, including some eldest sons, who were still unmarried at the age of fifty rose to twenty per cent in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, whilst the median age of marriage amongst the sons of the upper and professional classes had risen to twenty-eight by the year 1800.[5] By the middle of the eighteenth century Richardson, in *Sir Charles Grandison*, is already commenting through the pen of his heroine:

> I believe there are more bachelors now in England, by many thousands, than were a few years ago: and, probably, the numbers of them, (and of single women, of course) will every year increase. The luxury of the age will account a good deal for this; and the turn our sex take in *un*-domesticating themselves, for a good deal more.[6]

This passage reflects social trends already mentioned: higher living standards amongst the upper classes and the fact that wives had become something more (and more expensive) than domestic servants. If the analysis was at least partly correct, Richardson's prognosis certainly was. By 1773 *The Lady's Magazine* was complaining that nowadays 'the men marry with reluctance, sometimes very late, and a great many are never married at all'.[7] By the end of the eighteenth century twenty-five per cent of upper-class women remained lifelong spinsters – no less than one in four. Half a century earlier Richardson's Harriet Byron, herself the recipient of innumerable proposals of marriage, regarded spinsterhood as an inevitable fate for many women: 'I think, as matters stand in this age, or indeed ever did stand, that those women who have joined with the men in their insolent ridicule of old maids, ought never to be forgiven'.

Upper-class women who remained unmarried were not destitute. Indeed, the lack of suitable husbands and the fact that marriage portions continued to rise amongst the landed classes, meant that it was often more prudent for a daughter to remain a lifelong spinster than to marry a man with no property or immediate prospects, and fathers were reluctant to give their dowried daughters away too cheaply. Any woman of sense would want to avoid the desperate

manoeuvres to catch a bachelor so aptly portrayed in the wiles of Mrs Bennet, which seem rather less silly when we remember that she had five unportioned daughters and the family estate was entailed, a practical detail which the detached and misanthropic Mr Bennet tends, like other problems, to ignore.

But even though upper-class women who remained unmarried were not left destitute, the lack of marriage prospects was a catastrophe in other ways. Educated women were doomed to a life of enforced idleness. At a time when household management and domestic affairs had been turned over to stewards, women spent their time reading novels, going to the theatre, playing cards, paying formal visits, or going to balls and assemblies in the season. Great fun for a while, but intolerable for any intelligent woman after a time if there was no husband in prospect, with a promise of a changed life-style, and the responsibility of family and household. It was from the ranks of these upper-class women, the privileged but bored twenty-five per cent, who had gone through nine seasons and had nothing to look forward to but a tenth, women with educated minds, with time on their hands and no immediate prospect of change, that the first wave of distinguished women novelists emerged. Edgeworth, Austen and Burney were all unmarried at thirty, women with lively minds and time on their hands.

But women writers could not have come to the fore if there had not been a ready-made market, mainly provided by the very class from which they themselves came. The improved education of women and their increased leisure stimulated all forms of entertainment, but book publishing perhaps most of all. And, with no particular aim at self-improvement or specialised knowledge, it was novels that women mostly read. Cheaper paper and increased sales brought down the cost of publishing, and the spread of the circulating libraries catered for the needs of the growing number of educated and leisured women. The first such library was opened in Bath in 1725, London got one in 1739, and by the 1780s they were to be found in all the major market towns of England. By then the libraries were buying some 400 copies of an average printing of 1000 copies.

Clearly it was only a question of time before some of these women readers, having read countless novels, said to themselves: 'I could do this' and had a go. If she was still single, still scribbling and with time on her hands by the age of twenty-seven or so, the likelihood was, she

would succeed in producing something publishable. With novel sales booming, a publisher would be only too happy to accept a manuscript which met the needs of the market (and early women's novels, particularly Austen's, show strong signs of inbreeding), especially if the anonymous author could be bought off for a modest outlay of £20 or £30. Which, being young ladies of leisure, they usually could be.

2. Finding a Structure

ALTHOUGH women had been writing novels throughout the eighteenth century, they formed a sort of literary sub-culture. Stupid romances for stupid women, was how the male-dominated cultural elite of the period dismissed this steady output. Numerically, women novelists were already in the majority, but in terms of prestige and respect they were nowhere. Denigrating the output of women writers and its effects on female readers was something of a national pastime. It was considered a cause for concern, much as nowadays parents and educationalists worry about the effects of comics and television on the young.

As a result the kind of educated upper-class woman who might be attracted to writing at the latter end of the eighteenth century was put on the defensive. She might try and fend off criticism by treating the whole activity as a joke, or she could try to justify herself by claiming to provide an antidote to the poisonous influence of bad women writers. As we shall see, women novelists tried both these methods of self-defence.

At the same time, aspiring women novelists could hardly begin to write novels in a literary and cultural vacuum, and as far as themes and preoccupations are concerned they had far more in common with writers like Eliza Haywood and Mary Davys, however despised by the male elite, than they could have with the most brilliant and successful male writers. The cultural divide between men and women was nowhere deeper than in the writing of novels during the eighteenth century, and the reasons are fairly obvious when one looks at male literary output of the period.

The dominant male novel form during the eighteenth century was the picaresque, and its most successful exponents were Fielding and Smollett. Now, clearly, for both practical and moral reasons, the picaresque form was quite unsuitable for women writers. It was quite unthinkable for young ladies, and therefore young heroines, to wander about the countryside having bawdy adventures, or, indeed, adventures of any kind. It might be desirable for young heroes to show their mettle by getting into scrapes and sowing a few wild oats

amongst serving wenches and bawds, but it certainly would not do for young heroines, for whom ignorance was usually equated with innocence, and who never stepped beyond the threshold without being carefully chaperoned. As we shall see, some women did develop a female variation of the picaresque novel: in the Gothic novel the heroine does have distinctly unladylike adventures, but she is an innocent victim, and therefore not responsible for her own odyssey. Thus the demands of fantasy are reconciled with the demands of morality.

But the Gothic novel was not a direct offspring of the male picaresque novel. Rather it was an elaboration of the female novel of seduction and betrayal. There were two main themes open to the women novelists of the eighteenth century, and they were like different sides of the same coin: the conduct-in-courtship novel, and the novel of misconduct, of seduction, betrayal and ruin. One was an exemplar for young ladies to follow, the other a dreadful warning.

Richardson, writing novels from the point of view of women, inevitably had to oppose the one-sided male morality expressed in the picaresque novel. From seducers and would-be seducers who either married or destroyed his heroines he went on to portray Sir Charles Grandison, the ultimate lady's man, always a gentleman, always fit for the drawing room, adored by all well-bred women for his perfect manners and morality. Sir Charles has never had anything in common with Tom Jones; one cannot imagine him having ever tried to seduce a servant girl below stairs. Richardson rejects the double standard, and in *Sir Charles Grandison* he constantly refutes the popular notion that reformed rakes make good husbands. He refutes the idea of a double standard for men, practising one set of manners and morals with women, in the parlour, and another amongst themselves. Harriet Byron says firmly that 'I should have a mean opinion of a man, who allowed himself to talk, even to *men*, what a woman might not hear.'[1]

Richardson's attitude was to gain increasing support during the second half of the eighteenth century, probably on account of the social changes described in the last chapter. If upper-class domestic life was becoming more civilised, then men also had to become more civilised. If women were being educated to become companions to their husbands, it followed that men also had to change somewhat, to become fit companions for their wives. Tenderness, kindness and sensibility were increasingly regarded as male virtues, and the Man