

WOMEN AND  
LITERATURE IN BRITAIN  
1700–1800

EDITED BY  
VIVIEN JONES

*University of Leeds*



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# Contents

<i>List of illustrations</i>	vii
<i>List of contributors</i>	viii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xi
<i>Chronology</i>	xii

Introduction	i
<i>Vivien Jones</i>	

## PART I CONSTRUCTING WOMEN IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

### EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY FEMININITIES

1 Writings on education and conduct: arguments for female improvement	25
<i>Kathryn Sutherland</i>	
2 Eighteenth-century femininity: ‘a supposed sexual character’	46
<i>Harriet Guest</i>	
3 Women and race: ‘a difference of complexion’	69
<i>Felicity A. Nussbaum</i>	

### WOMEN, FAMILY, AND THE LAW

4 Women’s status as legal and civic subjects: ‘A worse condition than slavery itself?’	91
<i>Gillian Skinner</i>	
5 Women in families: the great disinheritance	111
<i>Ruth Perry</i>	

## WOMEN AND PRINT

- 6 Women and the business of print 135  
*Paula McDowell*
- 7 Women readers: a case study 155  
*Jan Fergus*

## PART II: WRITING WOMEN IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

- 8 (Re)discovering women's texts 179  
*Isobel Grundy*
- 9 Women and the rise of the novel: sexual prescripts 197  
*Ros Ballaster*
- 10 Women poets of the eighteenth century 217  
*Margaret Anne Doody*
- 11 Women and the theatre 238  
*Angela J. Smallwood*
- 12 Women and popular culture: gender, cultural dynamics,  
 and popular prints 263  
*Dianne Dugaw*
- 13 Varieties of women's writing 285  
*Clare Brant*
- Guide to further reading* 306  
*Index* 311

## *Illustrations*

- 1 Engraving of Catharine Macaulay as a Roman matron, *page 57*  
by G. B. Cipriani after J. Basire. Frontispiece to volume III  
of her *History of England* (1767).
- 2 Anna Laetitia Barbauld as a Roman matron. Modern cameo 58  
cast from the mould produced by Wedgwood in 1775.  
Reproduced by permission of the Trustees of the Wedgwood  
Museum, Barlaston, Staffordshire, England.
- 3 Intersecting markets: magazines, novels, and plays obtained 161  
by women.
- 4 Joshua Reynolds, *Mrs Abington as 'The Comic Muse'* (c. 1768). 247  
Reproduced by permission of The National Trust,  
Waddesdon Manor.
- 5 Dupont, *Mrs Pope* [formerly Miss Younge] as *Monimia in* 250  
*'The Orphan'*. Garrick Club/e.t. archive.
- 6 Portrait by M. Laroon of Mrs Parker, a well-known ballad- 267  
singer and seller of the 1680s, from a print published by  
R. S. Kirkby (1813). Photograph courtesy of the Harvard  
Theatre Collection.
- 7 Portrait of Hannah Snell (c. 1750). Photograph courtesy of 277  
the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, University of  
California, Los Angeles.

CHAPTER I

*Writings on education and conduct: arguments for  
female improvement*

*Kathryn Sutherland*

Religion therefore has been the basis of my plan.

Hester Chapone, *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind*<sup>1</sup>

Within the emergent class society of eighteenth-century Britain, to belong to the middle and to be female was to be in a position of agency and influence in the formation of social relations. To be female and to belong to the middle argues an ability to balance the extremes of either end of the social order and to stand for ‘right regulation’, a phrase which contemporary women writers invoke like a mantra to justify their own pronouncements. This linking of gender and rank is sustained in the attempts of various women activists to enlarge social and intellectual opportunities for their sex. By the later decades of the century, the middle-class woman has emerged as her sex’s genuine representative with the power to censor by her criticism the excessive femininity of the luxury-identified aristocrat and to redeem by the example of her conduct and instruction the undifferentiated existence of her labouring counterpart. To both she exhibits the emulative quality of ‘true value’. ‘True value’, so constructed, resides in such female embodiments as wife, mother, domestic economist, and educator. Its recognition depends on the prescriptive force of a set of mental and emotional qualities culturally defined as ‘feminine’: sympathy, decorous accomplishment, chastity. This narrowed definition of ‘the feminine’ exists in explicit opposition to that wider cultural ‘feminisation’ (of men and women) which was the assumed consequence of deregulated desire within an unhampered commercial economy.<sup>2</sup>

In *Desire and Domestic Fiction: a Political History of the Novel*, Nancy Armstrong argues what has proved in the ten years since its publication an influential thesis. According to Armstrong, the growing fashion for conduct books in Britain in the course of the eighteenth century provided a transitional aristocratic-to-bourgeois culture with a new

language in which to conceptualise and articulate its changing institutional relations. In such books, a set of 'rules for sexual exchange', derived from a 'grammar' of female subjectivity, are invoked in order to establish the desired domestic relations and practices of an apparently non-political, private sphere. And through those domestic relations and practices, the necessary economic relations of the modern commercial polity are encoded and reproduced. Consequently, the public focus in the conduct book on the private and the insignificant – its devising of a special kind of educational programme for those who are not to be educated (women) – performs massive ideological work across the gender divide. Through the prescription and management of female value, the conduct book implies larger social structures. The conduct book is about the creation of coherent identity, and the middle-class female as its representative. Armstrong puts it like this: 'In fact, it is accurate to say that such writing as the conduct books helped to generate the belief that there was such a thing as a middle class with clearly established affiliations before it actually existed. If there is any truth in this, then it is also reasonable to claim that the modern individual was first and foremost a female.' In the course of the eighteenth century, the conduct book absorbed aspects of socially and generically diverse earlier forms – devotional writings, the marriage manual, works on household economy and recipe books – to create a composite character-kit, incorporating practical advice on the duties of womanhood, on reading, dress, and desirable accomplishments, with moral instruction on less palatable issues, like the regulation of the affections and the control of moods, and with categories of virtuous identity, as daughter, wife, mother, widow. In confounding assumptions of 'natural' gender difference with definitions of 'proper' or 'suitable' behaviour, the conduct book sought to conceptualise and interpret female behaviour as predictor of social behaviour more generally. It constructs female identity in imagined contention with anti-social, deviant or extreme, forms which its powerful example then exorcises: the irresponsible, the overrefined, the ungoverned, the under- or over-educated. And the genre's relation to the emerging novel of manners, from Haywood and Richardson to Burney and Austen, is well established.<sup>3</sup>

#### A MIDDLE-CLASS IDEAL

Coherent identity is a limiting and impossible fiction. It is nevertheless a useful fiction, a provisional space which enables society and individual

to act. Thus, for example, the conduct book's construction of the domestic, middle-class female brings into uncomplicated being the fiction of the rational economic male; more problematically, it constitutes woman herself as the tractable occupant of a complementary space. Both the general contours and the details of the convention are sufficiently fixed by mid century for Jane Collier to invoke them by implication in her *Essay on the Art of Ingeniously Tormenting; with Proper Rules for the Exercise of that Pleasant Art* (1753). The first section of this two-part *Essay* is addressed, 'to those, who may be said to have an exterior power from visible authority', such as masters, parents, and husbands; the second offers advice 'to those, who have an interior power, arising from the affection of the person on whom they are to work' – chief among these are wives.<sup>4</sup> Collier's manual holds a mirror to the rules of acceptable conduct, an inversion of values which satirises bad behaviour and yet manages to suggest the limitations and frustrations in the approved model. For example, from advice to a wife:

Carefully study your husband's temper, and find out what he likes, in order never to do any one thing that will please him.

If he expresses his approbation of the domestic qualities of a wife; such as family oeconomy, and that old-fashioned female employment, the needle; neglect your family as much as ever his temper will bear; and always have your white gloves on your hands. Tell him, that every woman of spirit ought to hate and despise a man who could insist on his wife's being a family drudge; and declare, that you will not submit to be a cook and a semstress to any man. But if he loves company, and cheerful parties of pleasure, and would willingly have you always with him, nose him with your great love of needle-work and housewifery. Or should he be a man of genius, and should employ his leisure hours in writing, be sure to shew a tasteless indifference to every thing he shews you of his own. The same indifference, also, may you put on, if he should be a man who loves reading, and is of so communicative a disposition, as to take delight in reading to you any of our best and most entertaining authors. If, for instance, he desires you to hear one of Shakespeare's plays, you may give him perpetual interruptions, by sometimes going out of the room, sometimes ringing the bell to give orders for what cannot be wanted till the next day; at other times taking notice (if your children are in the room), that Molly's cap is awry, or that Jackey looks pale; and then begin questioning the child, whether he has done any thing to make himself sick. If you have needle-work in your hands, you may be so busy in cutting out, and measuring one part with another, that it will plainly appear to your husband, that you mind not one word he reads. (pp. 123–5)

The unobtrusive arrangement of the household and care of children, needlework, a taste for canonical literature, an even temper, a ready accommodation of her husband's moods, and an intelligent interest in



and praise of his pastimes – these are the approved female qualities to be deduced from Collier’s disruptive model.

Just how standard they are can be discovered from a comparison with Hester Mulso Chapone’s hugely influential *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind, Addressed to a Young Lady* (1773). Addressed by an aunt to her niece, ‘in your fifteenth year’ (I, 3), this two-volume manual concerns itself with the virtues and skills necessary to the female of middle rank on the brink of adulthood. Chapone’s *Letters* was reprinted at least sixteen times in separate editions in the last twenty-five years of the eighteenth century and frequently bound, as was the custom, well into the nineteenth century with other conduct manuals, to form small ‘Lady’s Libraries’ of improving texts. Its premises, and its detailed curriculum, provide the ideological heart of Austen’s *Mansfield Park* (1814).

According to Chapone, discretion, the basis for lasting domestic happiness, is only acquired through a programme of ‘regulation’ and ‘government’ (letters 4 and 5 entitled ‘On the Regulation of the Heart and Affections’, and letter 6 ‘On the Government of the Temper’), which presumes a system of internal and external controls, of self and social checks. Letter 6 opens with the following advice:

The principal virtues or vices of a woman must be of a private and domestic kind. Within the circle of her own family and dependants lies her sphere of action – the scene of almost all those tasks and trials, which must determine her character, and her fate, here, and hereafter. Reflect, for a moment, how much the happiness of her husband, children, and servants, must depend on her temper, and you will see that the greatest good, or evil, which she ever may have in her power to do, may arise from her correcting or indulging its infirmities. (II, 5–6)

Letter 7, ‘On Economy’, describes economy as that ‘art’ and ‘virtue’ which ‘ought to have the precedence of all other accomplishments’ (II, 48), and as most evident when ‘nobody’s attention is called to any of the little affairs of it’ (II, 69). Letter 8, ‘On Politeness and Accomplishments’, declares that ‘the chief of these is a competent share of reading, well chosen and properly regulated’, but that ‘[t]he danger of pedantry and presumption in a woman – of her exciting envy in one sex and jealousy in the other – of her exchanging the graces of imagination for the severity and preciseness of a scholar, would be, I own, sufficient to frighten me from the ambition of seeing my girl remarkable for learning’ (II, 115, 121).

Chapone does not quarrel with the exclusively domestic horizons set for women’s lives, but rather makes it clear that, together with certain

natural capacities (for imagination rather than ‘preciseness’ (II, 121); and for ‘passive’ rather than ‘active courage’ (I, 124–5)), these will confine their education within certain bounds. However, the curriculum she proposes for the fifteen-year-old girl is neither unrigorous nor merely auxiliary, comprising as it does: a systematic study of the Bible; training in accounting and other aspects of household management; translations of the classics and a range of modern literature in French and English, only avoiding sentimental novels; botany, geology, astronomy; geography and chronology (the study of tables of significant times and dates); and, ‘the principal study’, history – ancient and modern, but particularly the history of Britain and its empire:

I know of nothing equally proper to entertain and improve at the same time, or that is so likely to form and strengthen your judgment, and, by giving you a liberal and comprehensive view of human nature, in some measure to supply the defect of that experience, which is usually attained too late to be of much service to us. (II, 125)

We should not underestimate the positive force of Chapone’s recommendations for a sustained programme of study for women and of the conviction that lies behind it: that Christian belief is a matter of reason and is itself the chief instructor of our rational faculties. The conventional emphasis on Christian piety and the social conservatism need to be adjusted in the light of Chapone’s equal insistence on the importance of inculcating critical faculties in women, to equip them to reach independent judgements in private life.

It is difficult for the modern reader to enter sympathetically the ideological boundaries of the conduct manual. The problem is twofold: writers whom we would now wish to distinguish on grounds of gender, known political sympathies, or opportunities, often share a common discursive construction (and containment) of femininity; and, alternatively, proposals for female education are subject to inflections of gender, rank (class), and religion that we now find uncomfortable to rearticulate.

For example, as the friend of Elizabeth Carter – the Greek scholar and translator of Epictetus – and member of the ‘Bluestocking’ group of intellectual women surrounding the society hostess Elizabeth Montagu (to whom Chapone dedicated her *Letters*), Hester Chapone has impeccable credentials as a promoter of women’s education. By tracing them we discover her place in a tradition of female intellectual enquiry sustained by personal contact from Mary Astell at the beginning of the century to Hannah More at its close. Montagu, to whom Chapone looks

for patronage, was the sister of Sarah Scott, author of the utopian study of female separatism *Millenium Hall* (1762), and their mother was Elizabeth Drake who may have been educated by the famous Bathsua Makin. One-time tutor to Princess Elizabeth, daughter of Charles I, Makin was author of *An Essay to Revive the Antient Education of Gentlewomen* (1673), one of the first systematic programmes for the education of young women, combining conventional instruction in domestic accomplishments with a more ambitious curriculum previously offered only to boys. Montagu, herself a published author on suitable female topics (*Dialogues of the Dead* (1760) and *An Essay on the Writings and Genius of Shakespear* (1769)), is the vital link between the generations of intellectual women in the eighteenth century – Carter, Mary Pendarves Delany, Frances Boscawen, and Catherine Talbot, among the earlier generation; and later, Frances Burney, Hannah More, and Anna Laetitia Aikin (Barbauld). Moreover, through the woman who became her mother-in-law, Sarah Chapone, Hester Mulso Chapone could trace a connection with an even earlier female intellectual tradition. It was while running a girls' boarding school in Gloucestershire in the 1730s that Sarah Chapone discovered the whereabouts of Elizabeth Elstob, the impoverished Anglo-Saxon scholar and champion of women's learning, and arranged for her employment as governess in the family of Montagu's friend, Margaret, Duchess of Portland. Elstob, who died in 1756, had been in her youth a member of the feminist circle surrounding the philosopher and polemicist Mary Astell.<sup>5</sup>

Against this dense network of female authorities empowering Chapone, now place what seems to be a direct literary source for the *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind*, and that is *A Letter, of Genteel and Moral Advice to a Young Lady*, written by the Revd Wetenhall Wilkes for his niece. Here Wilkes lays out his method for educating a young woman 'past the trifling amusements of childhood' and 'entering upon the stage of trial'. His suggested curriculum anticipates in detail, in topics for study and in its methods and general philosophy of female education, that proposed in Chapone's *Letters* thirty years later.

As in his related *Essay on the Pleasures and Advantages of Female Literature* (1741), Wilkes states his commitment to an ungendered capacity for ratiocination. He nevertheless assumes without question a set of natural distinctions between men and women which are reproduced within existing social and domestic institutions (education among them). In particular, he endorses women's retired affectivity as the responsive

refinement of men's pro-active encounters within a wider sphere of operation:

If it were but universally considered, that women were created to refine the joys, to soften the cares of humanity, by the most agreeable participation; that they have as great a share in the rational world as men have; and that they have as much reason to aspire to the highest virtues and accomplishments, as the wisest and the gravest philosophers – How many blessings and ornaments might we expect from the fair sex, who are formed by their natural tempers to goodness and tenderness, and so adapted by the brightness and clearness of their minds, to admire and imitate every thing that is polite, virtuous, and divine!<sup>6</sup>

This leaves women's rational education in an equivocal position, mortgaged to a strictly privatised function and committed to a social reinforcement that deprives it of all but the narrowest employment. Ironically, this is in contrast to the public parade of the badly educated woman whose knowledge is all in 'Dancing, Dress, or in the various Ceremonies of Visiting' (*Essay*, pp. 16–17).

In distinguishing the educated from the uneducated woman, intellectual expansion, mental space, becomes by general acceptance the corollary of physical restriction. It can be argued that the appropriation of the language of reason by the ideology of domestic containment offers women some scope for self-development and social influence (and we see something of how this works out in the complexly interiorised yet socially confined heroines of Jane Austen's novels). On the other hand, exclusion has its benefits: the stoutly misogynist discourse which denies compatibility between women and reason is diametrically opposed to the evidence for any counter-argument, and the parallel, alternative status of that counter-argument is thus left intact. The intertextual authority of Wilkes's curriculum and method may not overshadow Chapone's extensive female intellectual credentials, but it requires that we adjust any simple gendered assumptions of influence. It also highlights the compromise implicit in women educationalists' mid century plans to promote female seriousness.

#### FEMALE EDUCATIONALISTS

In the course of the eighteenth century, women educationalists are largely agreed with Mary Astell that women's 'Incapacity, if there be any, is acquired not natural.'<sup>7</sup> But their critique of social institutions tends to lack Astell's providential assurance of divine support and the alternative

rational conviction of a revisionist rhetoric of rights. Royalist and High Church, Astell was the author of *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (in two parts, 1694 and 1697), and of *The Christian Religion, as profess'd by a Daughter of the Church of England* (1705). Her *Reflections Upon Marriage* (1700; third edition 1706) is an important contribution to debates on political and domestic rights in the turbulent decades of the later seventeenth century. Marriage, the union between man and woman, is an ancient image for political association, and during this period the metaphor gained new currency within the debate over the relation between monarch and people. In the contemporary natural rights theories of Hobbes, Pufendorf, and Locke, argument turned on the conditions under which man rationally gives up his natural freedom within the social order: civil society, they maintain, is a voluntary relinquishing of original freedom for servitude to the state. In the long preface which she added to the third edition of her *Reflections*, Astell offers one of the earliest critiques of the contract analogy when she issues her famous challenge to Locke: 'If *all Men are born free*, how is it that all Women are born slaves?' and she continues: 'why is Slavery so much condemn'd and strove against in one Case, and so highly applauded; and held so necessary and so sacred in another?'<sup>8</sup> How in this climate of political enquiry can women's subjection be presumed to predate social institutions?

The basis of the disagreement is complex – Astell does not seriously argue that women are born slaves. What she does is use the anomalous exclusion of women from contemporary radical arguments for natural rights to reveal the fundamental flaw in those arguments themselves – that reason underlies contractual social relations, between the individual and the state or within marriage. Against natural law, she sets a providentialist commitment to divinely ordained hierarchy, within the public and the private spheres, where government and marriage both bear witness to a necessity for regulation. That regulation is divinely ordained, that wives should in consequence obey their husbands – these are not amenable to rationalisation, in the form of contract logic, even without its implied contradictions (conditional servitude for men/unconditional servitude for women); nor can the fact of abuse within marriage (as within government) be proof of right:

That the Custom of the World has put Women, generally speaking, into a State of Subjection, is not deny'd; but the Right can no more be prov'd from the Fact, than the Predominancy of Vice can justifie it. A certain great Man has endeavour'd to prove by Reasons not contemptible, that in the Original State of things the Woman was the Superior, and that her Subjection to the Man is an Effect

of the Fall, and the Punishment of her Sin . . . However this be, 'tis certainly no Arrogance in a Woman to conclude, that she was made for the Service of GOD, and that this is her End. Because GOD made all Things for Himself, and a Rational Mind is too noble a Being to be Made for the Sake and Service of any Creature. The Service she at any time becomes oblig'd to pay to a Man, is only a Business by the Bye. Just as it may be any Man's Business and Duty to keep Hogs; he was not Made for this, but if he hires himself out to such an Employment, he ought conscientiously to perform it. (p. 72)

The High Anglican orthodoxy and resignation with which the Tory Astell challenges the consensualism of the turn-of-the-century constitutional debates (Whig arguments for the right to resist tyranny and the means to secure individual rights) can seem perverse to the modern, usually secular, reader. But in affirming that government, private and public, is an aspect of divine will and not a device of human wisdom to meet the needs of moral and rational beings, she is able to distinguish women's potential (and rights) from the social constraints within which custom (and fact) arbitrarily place it: she constructs a space outside society in which female reason can operate.

Astell's suggestion for women's colleges, communities where women might live and learn together, the poorer members supported by the assets of their wealthier sisters, is a piece of reasoned and gendered idealism. It forms the basis of her two-part treatise *A Serious Proposal* (1694–7), in which she offers a programme of 'useful *knowledge*' to combat 'those pitiful diversions, those revellings and amusements' that commonly constitute women's employment (pp. 20–1). A response to the perceived perils of her commercial age, the *Serious Proposal* is less a detailed curriculum, in the manner of Chapone later, than a disquisition against material attachment which takes as given certain male assumptions about women's relationship to goods within the consumer society, assumptions that will determine the moral parameters of conduct literature through the eighteenth century. *A Serious Proposal*, then, declares at the outset the basis in commercial culture, in society as it is, of women's mental trivialisation.

One such assumption is explored at some length when Astell expounds her belief that a constant exposure to external objects – what she calls 'the little Toys and Vanities of the world' – renders people querulous, inconstant, and incapable of steady concentration; given the 'mistakes of our Education', women are particularly vulnerable to such trivialising contact (pp. 31, 10). In the context of her political and religious allegiances and a long literary tradition urging withdrawal from

the world, the remedy Astell suggests – retirement from the corrupting influences of fashionable life – is unremarkably conservative; it is only extreme in the determination with which it pursues its logical end: female mutuality, and material and spiritual self-sufficiency in isolation. For what Astell proposes threatens to unfix the gendered positions with regard to experience in a commercial society, the very positions that conduct literature, in its revised account of women's appropriate mental and physical space, will seek to preserve. She writes:

And first, as to the inconveniences of living in the World; no very small one is that strong *Idea* and warm perception it gives us of its Vanities; since these are ever at hand, constantly thronging about us, they must necessarily push aside all other Objects, and the Mind being prepossess'd and gratefully entertain'd with those pleasing Perceptions which external Objects occasion, takes up with them as its only Good, is not at leisure to taste those delights which arise from a Reflection on its self, nor to receive the *Ideas* which such a Reflection conveys, and consequently forms all its Notions by such *Ideas* only as sensation has furnish'd it with, being unacquainted with those more excellent ones which arise from its own operations and a serious reflection on them, and which are necessary to correct the mistakes, and supply the defects of the other. From whence arises a very partial knowledge of things, nay, almost a perfect ignorance in things of the greatest moment. (pp. 29–30)

Astell appears to distinguish between two kinds of mental operation: at the lower level (above which fashion-identified women tend not to rise), the mind is controlled ('prepossess'd') by the thoughts and desires which external objects create; beyond that, and reserved for those women who retire from the world, is a mental space unoccupied by externalities and filled instead with a nobler store of reflections because they are self-reflections. What is so radical in all this is the clear suggestion that, refusing her socially constructed place in a world of objects, woman will gain access to her truer self; in particular, that the restraint of appetite is an act of self-regard, in which 'pre-possession' (the control exercised over mind by the object world) gives place to self-possession. The quality which for Astell distinguishes retirement is reflection, by which concept and word she encompasses the complexities of an act which is at the same time a withdrawal of female value from the market place and an engagement to trade on different terms.

It is not until the 1790s and the writings of Catharine Macaulay, Hannah More, Mary Ann Radcliffe, Priscilla Wakefield, and Mary Wollstonecraft that a focus on the general moral peril consequent on women's marginalisation again lends the discourses of both rights and

providence a powerful purchase on issues of gendered education. Not until an urgent national political argument can again be mounted (100 years after the Glorious Revolution) for a professional female space can women's education be freed from the taint of mere accomplishments, those accessories of the naturally inferior which are in permanent competition in the conduct manuals for women's attention and time. The crisis years of the 1790s saw a revival of a debate current in the crisis years of the 1690s – the constitutional debate over natural rights, on the one hand, and providential order, on the other. In both periods the debate has a particular female, even a feminist, dimension, but more especially in the 1790s because of the enhanced moral status of the domestic sphere (and after a century of women's conduct manuals) in combating public excess of all kinds.

Among radical writers Catharine Macaulay, republican historian and political polemicist, issues the most profound challenge to the socially accommodated curricula for women's education. Written at the end of her career, under her second married name of Macaulay Graham, her *Letters on Education. With Observations on Religious and Metaphysical Subjects* (1790) proposes the abolition of the system of difference on which the conduct manual rests: by refusing to treat female education as a distinct topic (these are *Letters on Education*); by insisting on programmes for the equal, unsegregated education of boys and girls; by promoting energetic physical exercise for girls; by denying the formative influence of nature over social training. Macaulay uses the implied dialogic and familial style of the conduct book (uncles and aunts advising nieces, fathers and mothers advising daughters) to instruct her silent female addressee (Hortensia) in a 'speculative theory of education' that owes much to the arguments of Enlightenment masculinist rationalism – to Rousseau, but also to the Scottish philosophers – with their distinction between natural and civilised behaviour.

Against Rousseau's emphasis on a natural female inferiority, she sets the Scottish Lord Monboddo's sociological insistence that '[i]t is the capital and distinguishing characteristic of our species . . . that we can make ourselves as it were over again' and that 'man, in a state of society, is as artificial a being as his representation on the canvas of the painter.'<sup>9</sup> She accepts the challenge of universal, inevitable artificiality, *contra* Rousseau, as an opportunity to diminish rather than enhance gender difference. In the place of Rousseau's soft and alluring feminine seductress, as represented by Sophie in book 5 of *Emile, or On Education* (1762), she offers an androgynous ideal of womanhood – 'a careless, modest



beauty, grave, manly, noble, full of strength and majesty' – whose reasoned chastity will have power to reform sexual relations and establish them on a more equal basis (pp. 205–6, 221).

If Macaulay's celebration of female chastity appears to reinscribe the terms of the conduct manual, it is important to notice how she raises the arguments and scope of the genre to a higher level. '[T]he education of individuals is for ever going on, and consists of all the impressions received through the organs of sense, from the hour of birth to the hour of death' (p. 274). *Letters on Education* is a tract in the Enlightenment style, a comparative historical analysis of social and individual government which situates schooling (a Rousseau-derived syllabus) among a set of diverse institutions for civil refinement. Of particular significance in tracing a subsequent, 1790s tradition in female educational writing is the moral revision implied in her suggestions for religious study and for the extension of an understanding of God's benevolence beyond the human-scale. The recommendation that a serious engagement with the Christian scriptures be postponed until the age of twenty-one (p. 137) represents both an adjustment to the conventional curriculum of the conduct book (in which teenage girls are encouraged to set a study of the scriptures before other educational pursuits) and a Rousseau-derived attempt to place religious instruction on a more rational footing, as integral to responsible adulthood rather than merely regulatory of adolescent female desire. Taken with the unorthodox interest in unsettling the divisions between the human and animal kingdoms – the repeated advice, for example, that children be allowed to keep animals (p. 125) – the effect is to extend the moral framework of social and individual enquiry in ways that challenge traditional hierarchical assumptions – about gender-prescribed codes, but also about human sovereignty and the power of reason – and that chime with the revisionary perceptions of other contemporary women writers. For Macaulay, Wollstonecraft, Maria Edgeworth, and Anna Laetitia Barbauld the implications are liberal and democratic as well as feminist; for others, conservative activists in the Sunday School movement and lower-class education, like Sarah Trimmer and Hannah More, the expansion of sympathy to the unequal or the non-human is more narrowly contained but no less female-empowering for that. In either case, moral tales about children and animals are a noticeable feature of female educational tracts in the last years of the century; in either case, they represent a widening of the ground on which experience stands.<sup>10</sup>

There is a confidence and expansiveness to Macaulay's argument

which stems from her refusal to confine her discursive range within the general economy of female experience. Yet the restriction that gendered experience implies also serves a necessary oppositional function as her subject unfolds. There may be 'No characteristic Difference in Sex', as the title of letter 22 asserts, but 'the defects of female education have ever been a fruitful topic of declamation for the moralist' and 'By the intrigues of women, and their rage for personal power and importance, the whole world has been filled with violence and injury' (pp. 208, 213). Macaulay's vindication of female equality of opportunity implies also a tirade against contemporary European female behaviour, and exposes the persistent anti-female undertow beneath the educational treatise and conduct manual for women in their various forms. What the enlightened female is exhorted to root out and oppose, in herself and in society, is excessive femininity, with its essential taint of moral and commercial corruption.

In the 1790s' writings of Wollstonecraft, More, Wakefield, and Mary Ann Radcliffe, a common enquiry into the conditions for female improvement is linked to a wider political debate concerning the nature and membership of the state, patriotism, and social ethics. By giving a new priority to the economic construction of the feminine role within commercial culture, these writers reassess the conditions for moral refinement by which the conduct manual has attempted to distinguish (and marginalise) female behaviour from public behaviour. Adapting for female use aspects of a traditionally masculinist discourse of civic humanism, they are concerned to justify a more inclusive view of society and to confront those problems which seem to them to have been disregarded in the narrowing public focus of a newer scientific (and male) economic tradition – in particular, the problems of women workers and the poor. In the process, the 1790s sees the conduct manual in the hands of women writers temporarily recast as a more capacious and polemical form.

Priscilla Wakefield's *Reflections on the Present Condition of the Female Sex; with suggestions for its improvement* (1798) appears to issue a challenge to the Scottish commercial historians like Lord Kames, Adam Ferguson, John Millar, and particularly Adam Smith. Wakefield mimics their dominant discourse when she states that 'the progress of civilization [has] raised the importance of the female character', with the result that 'it has become a branch of philosophy, not a little interesting, to ascertain the offices which the different ranks of women are required to fulfil'. But she sees the logical extension of this interest to be the provision of useful

employments and (quoting Adam Smith) opportunities for 'productive labour' for all members of society, female as well as male: '[S]ince the female sex is included in the idea of the species, and as women possess the same qualities as men, though perhaps in a different degree, their sex cannot free them from the claim of the public for their proportion of usefulness.'<sup>11</sup>

A Quaker educationalist and philanthropist, Wakefield proposes no large-scale constitutional reform; her concern is to improve women's opportunities within society as it is. But within these limits she is sharply critical of a system which denies to half the population the connection which it elsewhere inscribes as axiomatic, between usefulness and virtue. Her purpose, echoed throughout women's writings in the 1790s, is to enlarge society's recognition of woman beyond the conventional conduct-book ideal of protected wife to include the real circumstances of the widow, the spinster, the impoverished gentlewoman, and the factory hand. Fuelling her concern, as it does the concern of Wollstonecraft, Charlotte Smith, Radcliffe, and many other middle-class women writers, is the exigency of her own economic circumstances. The betrayed dependency of the inadequately educated middle-class female assumes large symbolic significance in fictional and polemical literature of the 1790s and is a direct outcome of a mounting concern that society cannot honour its commitment to the virtuous domestic icon of its own ideological construction:

There is scarcely a more helpless object in the wide circle of misery which the vicissitudes of civilized society display, than a woman genteelly educated, whether single or married, who is deprived, by any unfortunate accident, of the protection and support of male relations; unacquainted with any resource to supply an independent maintenance, she is reduced to the depths of wretchedness, and not infrequently, if she be young and handsome, is driven by despair to those paths which lead to infamy. (p. 66)

Wakefield's definition of female value represents a less mediated engagement with the productive base of commercial society than the conduct manual's conception of woman's role. She argues from a sexually undifferentiated moral code for women's equality of right to engage in economic production, making it clear that women's assumed capacity for the reproduction of value, identified here with virtuous consumption, is dependent on access to material means. Ostensibly addressed to the masculine power-base of society, Wakefield's *Reflections*, like Astell's a century before, are shaped by that sense of purpose which is only discovered in the exclusive act of female self-regard. Wakefield asks women

to take it upon themselves to adjust the economic mechanism in their own favour: to establish links between female education and employment and to institute a form of economic protection. Only thus will women avoid the perils of their 'natural' professions, notably prostitution. She pleads for ladies in the upper ranks to employ and patronise female teachers, seamstresses, and hairdressers, and to boycott those shops and products where male labour has supplanted that of women. Her social model is rigidly hierarchical, and as she constructs it from the highest to the lowest ranks, she expounds the necessity for a female labour chain linking the philanthropic services of the nobility and gentry with the educational and commercial opportunities of those in the middle and with those employed in factories, shops, and domestic service. Her reasoned deployment of the gendered terminology of the dominant commercial discourse reveals the arbitrariness of its sexual alignments at the same time as it demands their more rigorous enforcement to curb the transgression of those 'effeminate' traders (p. 153). Consequently, the independence which informs her female economic model is both an attempt to recode male–female relations across the social and moral structure and a reaffirmation of essential sexual difference as female subordination.

In some respects the most interesting of the women writers in the economic moralist tradition is Mary Ann Radcliffe, in her *Female Advocate* (1799). Less detailed in its prescriptions though no less perceptive in its economic survey than Wakefield's book, the power of its analysis lies in its skilful parade and wilful misuse of the accommodated female learning prescribed by the conduct manuals. Its two-part argument – 'The Fatal Consequences of Men Traders Engrossing Women's Occupations' and a continuation demonstrating that 'the Frailty of Female Virtue more frequently originates from embarrass'd Circumstances, than from a depravity of Disposition' – follows the customary shape of women's writings in this mode in apportioning to economic conditions and the failures of education a subsequent moral disposition. For remedy Radcliffe does not propose a violent reordering but a modest adjustment of the status quo, appealing to the dictates of Christianity and sexual appropriateness and even masculine self-interest. But the effect of hearing her measured and rational discourse as a parenthesis within the larger body of male rational discourse is nevertheless deeply ironic. Despite Radcliffe's accomplished mimicry and her clever deployment of the ammunition of patriarchy (she quotes copiously, for example, from *Paradise Lost* and biblical authority in a blatant misappropriation of

conduct-book learning), there is no real continuum between male and female reasoning; rather the result is a neat reversal of conventional gender assumptions in the exposure of the selfish and private motivation of male activity and the larger political virtue inherent in its female redress. Radcliffe's argument trades upon the complementarity of the languages of morality and economics as a challenge to society to make available in reality the conditions for virtue that it would enforce ideologically:

No: it was never intended that women should be left destitute in the world, without the common necessaries of life, which they so frequently experience, even without any lawful or reputable means of acquiring them, through the vile practice of men filling such situations as seem calculated, not only to give bread to poor females, but thereby to enable them to tread the paths of virtue, and render them useful members, in some lawful employment, as well as ornaments to their professions and sex. This lovely appearance, alas! is but too often thrown aside, and, frequently, *not* from vicious inclinations, but the absolute necessity of bartering their virtue for bread.

Then, is it not highly worthy the attention of men, men who profess moral virtue and the strictest sense of *honour*, to consider in what mode to redress these grievances! for women were ultimately designed for something better, though they have so long fared otherways.<sup>12</sup>

Like Wakefield and Radcliffe, the Tory Hannah More uses the generic scope of the conduct manual to mount a more ambitious public campaign; but, unlike theirs, hers draws polemical strength from a strict reinforcement of an orthodox female construction: woman in the home and not the workplace. For More, in a brilliant re-routing of Edmund Burke's anti-revolutionary defence of 'the little platoon we belong to in society' as the basis of 'public affections', it is woman's place at the heart of the well-managed family that in the war years of the 1790s makes her an instrument of community stability. Women, too, she implies, can be dutiful citizens. In her conduct books for the middle ranks More calls on her sex '[i]n this moment of alarm and peril' to exercise 'a patriotism at once firm and feminine for the general good!'

For, on the use which women of the superior class may be disposed to make of that power delegated to them by the courtesy of custom, by the honest gallantry of the heart, by the imperious controul of virtuous affections, by the habits of civilized states, by the usages of polished society . . . will depend, in no low degree, the well-being of those states, and the virtue and happiness, nay perhaps the very existence of that society.<sup>13</sup>

This is the national context, a country at war and a way of life to be defended, which More stridently colonises as domestic, female space in

the opening pages of *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education* (1799), a work whose contents pages indicate the degree to which a providentialist agenda locates national safety in the reformation of female manners as distinct from the redistribution of economic opportunity: 'On the education of women. The prevailing system tends to establish the errors it ought to correct. Dangers arising from an excessive cultivation of the fine arts'; 'On the moral and religious use of history and geography'; 'On dissipation and the modern habits of fashionable life'; 'On the duty and efficacy of prayer'. A title-page epigraph from Lord Halifax, compiler of the much-reprinted *The Lady's New Years Gift: Or, Advice to a Daughter* (1688), a manual preparing a beloved twelve-year-old child for the inequalities of marriage, announces at once the vindication in custom of More's philosophy.

Just as emphatically as Wakefield, More appeals to gender solidarity; but she reformulates feminist argument for rather different ends. For More, the assertion that social arrangements are as they are by virtue of divine authority serves to constitute the female position not as the weak point in the structure but as the anchor. The correlation of female to divine is a constant in her understanding of social arrangements and is jeopardised only when women deny their ordained duties as women; male deviation from providential ordering, vicious and criminal though it may be, does not imply the same deep disruption. Hence the real obstacle to social improvement is not male institutions but the unreformed or fashionable woman. More's conservative acceptance of the map of social experience is underpinned by a consciousness that Christianity itself inaugurates female authority. In her writings the biblical imperatives of the conduct-book tradition of female morality resurface as hugely empowering injunctions. It is as if in exposing and emphasising the genre's gendered categorisation of attributes she literalises their transforming potential.<sup>14</sup>

Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), after Macaulay's *Letters on Education* the earliest of these polemical refashionings of the conduct book and the best known, is in some ways the least satisfactory. Wollstonecraft's first book-length publication, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787), had been a conventional conduct book, in which the arguments and topics of a hundred-year tradition of such manuals by men and women weigh heavy. Here she rehearsed assiduously the guidelines laid down by Wilkes and Chapone for the education of women to maximise their potential as rational beings and to minimise their dependence on the life of the senses and of 'present indulgence'. Printed, like *Thoughts on . . . Daughters* for the liberal and Dissenting book-

seller Joseph Johnson, the later *Vindication* seemed to some of its first readers a work in the same vein. It was described by an early reviewer (for Johnson's own *Analytical Review*, for which Wollstonecraft had been writing since 1788) as 'in reality . . . an elaborate *treatise on female education*'.<sup>15</sup> Wollstonecraft contextualises her argument thus, 'I may be accused of arrogance; still I must declare what I firmly believe, that all the writers who have written on the subject of female education and manners from Rousseau to Dr Gregory, have contributed to render women more artificial, weak characters, than they would otherwise have been; and, consequently, more useless members of society.'<sup>16</sup> According to one critic, its sustained educational emphasis may explain why the *Vindication* was 'ignored rather than virulently attacked by most of those opposed to the political assumptions Wollstonecraft held'.<sup>17</sup> An argument addressing the shortcomings in contemporary systems for female education would strike a familiar, even hackneyed, note in 1792 and might accommodate, diffuse, or simply disguise many of the *Vindication's* more unsettling pronouncements.

For Wollstonecraft, the blame for a degraded femininity lies with consumer society, and with its instrument, education; but, like More, she can yet be discovered forging her ideal of womanhood out of the conditions of women's essential difference. Unlike More, however – but like her heroine Catharine Macaulay – Wollstonecraft writes within the doctrine of rights, not providence, and it is the calculated reassertion of the sovereignty of nature that, paradoxically, makes good women's claim to education and reason after the betrayal of socially instituted forms:

Women are, in common with men, rendered weak and luxurious by the relaxing pleasures which wealth procures; but added to this they are made slaves to their persons, and must render them alluring that man may lend them his reason to guide their tottering steps aright. Or should they be ambitious, they must govern their tyrants by sinister tricks, for without rights there cannot be any incumbent duties. The laws respecting woman . . . make an absurd unit of a man and his wife; and then, by the easy transition of only considering him as responsible, she is reduced to a mere cypher.

The being who discharges the duties of its station is independent; and, speaking of women at large, their first duty is to themselves as rational creatures, and the next, in point of importance, as citizens, is that, which includes so many, of a mother. The rank in life which dispenses with their fulfilling this duty, necessarily degrades them by making them mere dolls. Or, should they turn to something more important than merely fitting drapery upon a smooth block, their minds are only occupied by some soft platonic attachment; or, the actual management of an intrigue may keep their thoughts in motion; for when they

neglect domestic duties, they have it not in their power to take the field and march and counter-march like soldiers, or wrangle in the senate to keep their faculties from rusting.<sup>18</sup>

Appealing first to that self-interest which Adam Smith inscribes at the centre of the commercial model of society, Wollstonecraft requires women to identify reason as their prime characteristic and to use it to reject their commercially constructed roles as dependent 'cyphers'. Reason she here distinguishes from the stereotype of subversive cunning that Jane Collier animates in her satirical *Essay on the Art of Ingeniously Tormenting*. Indeed, despite assumptions to the contrary, Wollstonecraft's reason ('their first duty is to themselves as rational creatures') is something akin to Astell's rationalist independence in its grounding in a capacity for self-reflection or self-possession. Wollstonecraft next argues that women's second duty is to be mothers; but she is concerned with those conditions under which motherhood can be said to be subject to reason and therefore a function of citizenship rather than of any innate and merely subsidiary disposition. Bold in its demand for the re-estimation of women's social function, the reasoning is yet compromised by that ambiguity about the basis of sexual difference, which leaves the *Vindication's* larger argument for female rights poised in its attack upon women's social imprisonment somewhere between the sustained economic critiques of Wakefield and Radcliffe and the public reclamation of domestic virtue as practised by More.<sup>19</sup>

Paradoxically, for More, female authority is necessitated by the burden imposed on the domestic economy as the site of constructed appetites and compulsions whose power outstrips any attempt at public rationalisation. As queen of the conduct book, and in her rerouting of the instructive manual to the lower classes through her influential Cheap Repository Tracts, she exhorts late eighteenth-century society to practise responsible consumption and self-vigilance. In the crisis years of the 1790s and early 1800s hers is a conscious feminisation and providential redescription of citizen virtues, justified by the conflation of political and moral aims in the war-oriented discourse of the times and founded on woman's traditional capacity for moral personification.

For female polemicists and moral commentators, from Astell to Chapone and on to Wollstonecraft and More, the production and contesting of social value is bound intimately to issues of female education and improvement as it is prescribed in the conduct book; they write in consciously interpretative or revisionary dialogue with the genre. Theirs, finally, is a holistic and an ethical enquiry which is ultimately



distinguished in its wider social and spiritual contextualisation from the ever narrowing agenda of the official (male) economic discourse that its arguments shadow.

## NOTES

- 1 Hester Chapone, *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind, Addressed to a Young Lady*, 2nd edn, 2 vols. (London: H. Hughs for J. Walter, 1773), II, 226.
- 2 For further discussion of gender and commerce, see 'Introduction', pp. 8–13, and 'Guide to Further Reading'.
- 3 Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: a Political History of the Novel* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 60, 66. Armstrong's study is indebted to Mary Poovey's earlier important work on fiction and conduct literature: see Mary Poovey, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1984). For a recent essay arguing for contentious or resistant contemporary readings of conduct literature, see Vivien Jones, 'The Seductions of Conduct: Pleasure and Conduct Literature' in Roy Porter and Marie Mulvey Roberts (eds.), *Pleasure in the Eighteenth Century* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1996), pp. 108–32.
- 4 [Jane Collier], *An Essay on the Art of Ingeniously Tormenting; with Proper Rules for the Exercise of that Pleasant Art* (London: A. Millar, 1753), p. 19; rpt. from the 1757 edn, with an introduction by Judith Hawley (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1994), same pagination.
- 5 Elstob's significant engagement with the issue of women's education was largely in the form of intertextual commentary in her Anglo-Saxon publications. See Kathryn Sutherland, 'Editing for a New Century: Elizabeth Elstob's Anglo-Saxon Manifesto and Aelfric's St Gregory Homily' in D. G. Scragg and Paul E. Szarmach (eds.), *The Editing of Old English* (Cambridge: Boydell & Brewer, 1994), pp. 213–37.
- 6 Wetenhall Wilkes, *A Letter, of Genteel and Moral Advice to a Young Lady: Being a System of Rules and Informations; digested into a new and familiar method, to qualify the fair sex to be useful, and happy in every scene of life* (1740), 8th edn (London: L. Hawe, C. Clarke, R. Collins, 1766), pp. 5–6. See also Wilkes, *An Essay on the Pleasures and Advantages of Female Literature* (London: T. Cooper & R. Caswell, 1741). This volume shares long sections of argument verbatim with the *Letter*.
- 7 [Mary Astell], *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, for the Advancement of their true and greatest Interest* (1694), ed. Patricia Springborg (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1997), p. 10.
- 8 [Mary Astell], *Reflections Upon Marriage. To which is added a Preface, in Answer to Some Objections*, 3rd edn (1706) in Bridget Hill (ed.), *The First English Feminist* (Aldershot, Hants: Gower Publishing, 1986), p. 76.
- 9 Catharine Macaulay Graham, *Letters on Education. With Observations on Religious and Metaphysical Subjects* (London: C. Dilly, 1790), p. 10.

- 10 See: Sarah Trimmer, *Fabulous Histories: Designed for the Instruction of Children, Respecting their Treatment of Animals* (1786); Mary Wollstonecraft, *Original Stories from Real Life* (1788); and Maria Edgeworth, *The Parent's Assistant* (1795). There is also a growing market in the period for children's textbooks on travel, natural history, and elementary science, written by women. For example: Priscilla Wakefield, *An Introduction to Botany in a Series of Familiar Letters* (1796), and *The Juvenile Travellers* (1801); and Jane Marcet, *Conversations on Chemistry: in which the Elements of that Science are Familiarly Explained and Illustrated by Experiments* (1806). For further discussion of Anna Laetitia Barbauld, see ch. 2; on women's sympathy with animals, see also ch. 10, pp. 230–2.
- 11 Priscilla Wakefield, *Reflections on the Present Condition of the Female Sex; with suggestions for its improvement* (London: J. Johnson, 1798), pp. 8, 1–2.
- 12 Mary Ann Radcliffe, *The Female Advocate; or An Attempt to Recover the Rights of Women from Male Usurpation* (London: Vernor & Hood, 1799), pp. 26–7. On women and work, see also chs. 5 and 6, below.
- 13 Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), ed. Conor Cruise O'Brien (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1982), p. 135; Hannah More, *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education. With a View of the Principles and Conduct Prevalent Among Women of Rank and Fortune*, 2 vols. (London: Cadell & Davies, 1799), 1, 4–6.
- 14 This coincidence of Christian teaching and feminism in the writings of conservative and moderate women intellectuals is widespread. See, for example, the expanded and much revised version of a handbook originally published in 1787 by Sarah Trimmer, *The Oeconomy of Charity; or An Address to Ladies; adapted to the present state of charitable institutions in England: with a particular view to the cultivation of religious principles, among the lower orders of people*, 2 vols. (London: Longman; Robinson; and J. Johnson, 1801), 1, xii, where charity 'proves the importance of the Female Sex in society'.
- 15 See the *Analytical Review*, 12 (1792), 249; 13 (1792), 530.
- 16 Mary Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), ed. Carol H. Poston (New York: Norton, 1988), p. 22; ed. Miriam Brody Kramnick (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1978), p. 103. John Gregory's conduct book, *A Father's Legacy to his Daughters* (1774) went through numerous editions.
- 17 See R. M. Janes, 'On the Reception of Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 39 (1978), 293–302 (p. 294), which also quotes from the contemporary reviews in the *Analytical Review*. (Janes's essay is reprinted in Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, ed. Poston, pp. 297–307.)
- 18 Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, ed. Poston, p. 145; ed. Kramnick, pp. 257–8.
- 19 For further discussion of this ambiguity in Wollstonecraft, see ch. 4, pp. 104–5.