Conduct Literature for Women 1770–1830

Edited by
Pam Morris

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General Introduction

The texts comprising *Conduct Literature for Women, 1770–1830* cover the end of the eighteenth century and the first decades of the nineteenth century. Recent accounts of the period have tended to focus upon the continuities characterising the two centuries following the establishment of constitutional monarchy under William and Mary in 1689.[1] It is now perceived as the extended epoch in which major long-term processes of political, economic and cultural change brought into being the structures, institutions, systems and practices that constitute modern Britain. Unsurprisingly, these changes impacted in various ways upon the material conditions of women's lives, produced shifts in perceptions of relations between men and women and profoundly altered the prescriptive notions of the properly feminine and of expectations of the role women were to play within society.

Political changes affected women somewhat indirectly. The rejection of absolutism, with the forced abdication of James II, inevitably undercut claims that patriarchy was a God-ordained order. John Locke's *Two Treatises on Government* (1690), setting out a new contractual theory of kingship, constituted a rebuttal of Robert Filmer's *Patriarcha* (1680), a defence of the divine right to rule. Although political contention between Tory supporters of absolutism and Whig promoters of constitutionalism continued during the reign of William and Mary and somewhat into that of Anne, the succession of George I in 1714 marked the beginning of a period of relative political stability. The Hanoverian dynasty associated itself with the Whig ideology of enlightenment, progress and liberty. Nevertheless, despite Locke's efforts to clarify the nature of political consent and obligation, considerable ambiguities remained as to exactly who were to be numbered within the political nation. Certainly Locke had no notion of including women and he even excluded marriage from agreements considered contractual, arguing that it was a natural relationship rather than a civic one. Yet the new political order was heralded in, justified and sustained by a proclaimed belief in liberty, rational improvement and

1 Richard Price, *British Society 1680–1880 Dynamism, Containment and Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707–1837* (London: Vintage, 1996); Kathryn Gleadle and Sarah Richardson (eds), *Women in British Politics, 1760–1860: The Power of the Petticoat* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000).

progress, and some eighteenth-century women were not slow to apply these ideals to their own aspirations and social position. Throughout the eighteenth century, women drew upon the tradition of libertarian political thought stemming from Locke as a basis for claims for improvement in their status and more especially to denounce what they saw as male practices of tyranny and absolutism.[1]

By the later decades of the eighteenth century, political consensus began to give way to contention, especially from those who remained marginal to the establishment: Dissenters, the lower classes and women. In particular, the populist campaigns of John Wilkes in the 1760s and then the American War of Independence in the 1770s had the effect of politicising national consciousness and giving renewed urgency to claims for liberty in opposition to absolutism and 'old corruption'. This intensification of the political climate opened up opportunities for women to engage in public controversies both in print and even in the new debating societies that began to appear in London and other cities.[2] On the other hand, national crises, like the loss of the American colonies, also produced insecurities that frequently found expression in terms of gender identities: fears that men were becoming effeminate and that women were encroaching on male prerogatives in assertively unfeminine ways. Much of the popular support for John Wilkes, a well-known womaniser and rake, may have derived from his projection of a pugnaciously English masculinity. The final and ultimately traumatic political event of the eighteenth century – the French Revolution, initiated with the fall of the Bastille in 1789 – brought a new fear to the forefront of national consciousness: fear of insurrection. The resulting sense of insecurity in Britain was exacerbated by the widespread popularity of Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* (1791–2) with the working classes and by the dire predictions of a population explosion among the poor made by Thomas Malthus in 1798.[3] As a result, a newly perceived, urgent need for the social management and improved moral discipline of the labouring classes offered well-to-do women an extension of their sphere of activities and a route to public esteem that could be articulated in conservative terms.

1 See for example, Catherine Macaulay Graham, *Letters on Education* (London: C. Dilly, 1790); *Woman Triumphant: Or, the Excellency of the Female Sex* and *Woman not Inferior to Man* reprinted in *Conduct Literature for Women 1720–1770* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2004), Vols 1, 2.

2 For details of women's participation in debating societies, see Mary Thale, 'Women in London Debating Societies in 1780', *Gender and History,* 7, 1 (April 1995), pp. 5–24.

3 Thomas Robert Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population as it Affects the Future Improvement of Society, with Remarks on the Speculations of Mr Godwin, M. Condorcet, and Other Writers* (London: J. Johnson, 1798).

Economic changes, especially to patterns of employment and production, impinged more directly upon women's lives than did political events. Although large-scale factory production did not become the dominant mode of industry until near the end of the nineteenth century, a consumer culture was establishing itself by the middle of the eighteenth century. It has been argued that the period saw a persistent contraction of employment for women, who came to be more and more confined within the home.[1] It seems more likely, however, that an alteration in types of work occurred, with female employment in dairying, brewing and medicine suffering contraction, while opportunities expanded in the fields of women's clothes production, domestic service and school-teaching. For middle-class women, the most significant change came in the shift of the household from a site of production to that of consumption. Increasingly, as the eighteenth century progressed, household necessities like candles, bed linen and even bread came to be bought from shops rather than made by the women of the house. Shopping became a new leisure activity and the home the focus both of a new sense of comfort and of taste. Upholstered furniture, tea-services, bookcases and books, engravings, looking-glasses and musical instruments bespoke the refined identities of their owners, while children of well-to-do families enjoyed shop-bought toys, games and educational aids. The increasing emphasis on taste as an index of social status enhanced women's importance as the main purchasers of domestic and luxury goods. Buying from shops and the employment of greater numbers of female servants also allowed middle-class women more leisure to patronise the expanding range of public provision for the cultivated: theatres, concert halls and art galleries.

It was thus particularly in the domain of culture that the most striking changes opened up, in the lives of well-to-do women at least. The vibrant public sphere of cultural institutions that came into being in the eighteenth century, especially the rapidly expanding market for print productions of all kinds – pamphlets, journals, novels, advice and information books – constituted a major transformation of the social world. Women, as both readers and writers, played a significant role in the expansion of print culture. Civic and public life as a collective arena for the activities of private citizens is best understood as an invention of the eighteenth century. In all major cities and in most small towns, circulating libraries, musical societies, lectures and

1 For the classic expositions of this view, see Alice Clark, *The Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century* (1919; London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982); Ivy Pinchbeck, *Women Workers and the Industrial Revolution 1750–1850* (1930; London: Cass, 1969); see also Bridget Hill, *Women, Work and Sexual Politics in Eighteenth-Century England*, 2nd edn (London: University College London Press, 1994).

exhibitions, assemblies and balls flourished. So, too, did increasing numbers of voluntary associations, charities and benevolent and reforming organisations. The degree of access to this wide and expanding public sphere enjoyed by women remains somewhat a matter of debate, but their presence, numbers and influence seemed to contemporaries strikingly evident.

By the mid-eighteenth-century, a new sense had emerged that cultural appreciation and activities constituted the hallmark of a nation's modernity and civilisation; in turn, this engendered widespread concern with the cultivation of the mind. Locke's insistence that the newborn child brings no knowledge into the world ensured that education was a central theme for enlightened opinion. The popularity in Britain of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's education novel, *Émile* (1762), further stressed the crucial importance of the child's early upbringing. Likewise, David Hartley, in *Observations on Man, his Frame, his Duty, and his Expectations* (1749), optimistically harnessed Locke's empiricism to a religious belief in human perfectibility, offering a programme for universal benevolence as the logical outcome of a benign education. Women drew widely upon this framework of ideas to argue for their right, as rational beings, to the means of self-improvement through education in accordance with a divinely ordained religious responsibility to strive for human perfection. In truth, an acceptance of the need to educate women was probably more effectively brought about by the realisation that during the critically formative early years of life all children, boys as well as girls, are in the care of their mothers. As future mothers of future men, girls had to be rationally improved.

It was further argued that only an educated, cultivated woman could attract a rational man seeking in his wife a civilised companion rather than merely an object of sexual gratification. A new ideal of marriage as a cultured domestic partnership was gaining ground. This view was articulated as part of a wider project, originating in the writing of Richard Steele and Joseph Addison and especially in their journal the *Spectator* (1711–12), to reform masculine codes of behaviour. The transactions of an increasingly commercial society required an urbane and polite mode of intercourse as opposed to the traditional male codes based upon ideals of physical hardihood, honour and revenge. By the last decades of the century, it had become fairly commonplace to claim that women exerted a civilising influence upon men and to equate the level of a nation's barbarity with the degree of subjection suffered by its women. A concern with women's sympathetic susceptibilities, held to derive from a finer nervous system, was central to the cult of sensibility that came to dominate much writing and thinking from the middle of the century until around the 1790s.

This cultural privileging of feeling and sentiment also fed into the growing influence of Methodism and evangelicalism as movements that, by the end of the century, were transforming notions of social morality. Women were a powerful force within the movements, both of which opposed the optimism of progress that had energised earlier Enlightenment ideology. In opposition to perfectibility, they sought to remind the nation that human life originated in sin and that mortal nature partakes of corruption and depravity. When the French Revolution seemed to degenerate into violence and anarchy with the September Massacres of 1792 and the execution of the king and queen in 1793, not only were the aspirations of most liberals and radicals in Britain crushed, the more pessimistic view of human nature seemed vindicated. In the post-Revolutionary decades of the early nineteenth century any progressive sentiments or aspirations had to find a means of articulation within a public sphere dominated by reactionary politics.

There has been a tendency, following Michel Foucault's assault on Enlightenment ideology,[1] for historians and cultural critics to look rather more sceptically at the eighteenth-century's own narratives of liberal improvement. It has been suggested that apparent concessions made to demands for change, were, in effect, only strategies for repositioning power within the established order. More recently, there has been a counter questioning of this rather all-embracing historical pessimism. In looking at the transformations to women's position during the period 1770–1830, there are five distinct but interrelated areas of change that have provoked interpretive debate as to whether the alterations should be understood in a negative or a positive light. In the first place, it has been argued that during the course of the eighteenth century a 'separate spheres ideology' came to dominate women's lives and the parameters of female identity.[2] As part of this framework of thinking, men were understood to be physically and mentally endowed for an active life within the public sphere of work, politics, civic organisation and military conflict, while women, it was claimed, were designed by God and nature for the domestic responsibilities of wife and mother. Within this ideology, women were

1 See Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilisation*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Pantheon, 1965); *The Birth of the Clinic*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon, 1973); *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon, 1972).

2 One of the most influential studies to make this case is Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780–1850* (London: Hutchinson, 1988); see also, Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Public Man, Private Woman* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).

accorded all the virtues that came to constitute middle-class hegemony – orderliness, prudence, modesty and industriousness – but, despite this, they remained enclosed within domesticity. Their legitimate aspirations were limited to the attainment of marriage and motherhood and their education curtailed to that restricted horizon.

Two other discourses, a new ideal of companionate marriage and a cult of sentimentality, were closely intertwined with the ideology of domesticity. By the end of the eighteenth century, in conduct writing and literary texts, marriage was being remodelled as a relationship based upon affection, sympathy and shared concerns. Yet this rhetoric, it has been argued, did nothing to ameliorate the wife's subordination. Rather, the romantic ideal disguised a continuing perception of women as providers for male needs. The cult of sentimentality became one of the most dominant discursive modes of the second half of the eighteenth century. Again, there are interpretive debates as to how far women were beneficiaries or victims of this rhetoric. Women were certainly central to the discourses of sentimentality, flourishing as writers of sentimental novels and poems. As much admired, much suffering heroines of male-authored works like Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* (1748–9), they were wept over by men as well as women. Undoubtedly, a transformation had occurred from the earlier misogynist stereotype of women as daughters of Eve; vain, frivolous and licentious by nature. After the mid-century, femininity came to be idealised in terms of natural delicacy and susceptible sympathies. Yet, it is claimed, this rhetoric of women's superior sensibility functioned to trap them within a gendered notion of the female body as frail and in need of protection.[1] Their heightened sensibilities were understood as deriving from a more finely-wrought nervous system that rendered them less rational than men and more under the impress of emotions.

Many women writers can be found subscribing enthusiastically to the ideology of separate spheres, to companionate marriage and to the cult of sentimentality. This has led to a fourth pessimistic narrative of enclosure for women: that of entrapment within male discourse. To be published, or even to be listened to when they speak, women, it is claimed, are forced to adopt the rhetoric, discursive forms, genres and stereotypes approved by men.[2] Those who rashly attempt to speak for

1 Anthony Fletcher, *Gender, Sex and Subordination in England 1500–1800* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), pp. 376–400; G. J. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-century Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp. 24–36.

2 See for example, Mary Poovey, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984); Gary Kelly, *Women, Writing and Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

themselves are silenced by ridicule, hostile criticism and economic pressure. Finally, it has been argued that even if a current of libertarian opinion on women's rights was able to develop during the eighteenth century, deriving from Enlightenment beliefs and culminating in Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), that radicalism was effectively killed off in the reactionary climate of the 1790s.[1] In this historical interpretation, the 1790s form a watershed between earlier opportunities for progressive politics and the post-Revolutionary aftermath of all-prevailing conservatism.

Before considering to what extent the texts presented in *Conduct Literature for Women, 1770–1830* may be able to contribute to these interpretive debates, it is important to point out that some of the influential conduct books published during the years 1770–1830 are not included here. The most notable are Wollstonecraft's *Vindication* and Hannah More's *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education* (1799). These two texts are often regarded as articulating respectively the most radical and the most conservative views on women, although in fact there is common ground between them. Also omitted from this collection are Catherine Macaulay Graham's progressive *Letters on Education* (1790), which were highly influential on Wollstonecraft's thinking and, on the other side of the political divide, Thomas Gisborne's *Enquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex* (1797), which advocated a return to biblical severity in terms of a woman's total subordination to her husband. In addition, earlier popular conduct books like James Fordyce's *Sermons to Young Women* (1766) and John Gregory's *A Father's Legacy to his Daughters* (1774) continued to be republished throughout the period. How influential was all this conduct advice upon their intended readers? While the total numbers sold may give some indication of popularity this remains problematic: it is likely that conduct books were often bought by parents, possibly fathers, for their daughters. That texts could meet with ridicule as well as respect is clear, not just from Wollstonecraft's indignant polemic against Fordye's *Sermons*, but by the satiric representation of it in *Pride and Prejudice* by the much more conservative Jane Austen.[2]

Conduct writing, of course, is prescriptive not descriptive; it only offers us the writer's perception of how women should behave and what role they should occupy in society. A striking feature of most of the texts in this collection is their ambiguity. They are frequently

1 Janet Todd, *The Sign of Angellica: Women, Writing and Fiction, 1660–1800* (London: Virago, 1989), pp. 218–35; William Stafford, *English Feminists and their Opponents in the 1790s: Unsex'd and Proper Females* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), p. 33.

2 *Pride and Prejudice* (1813; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), Book I, ch. 14, p. 60.

janus-faced, struggling to articulate contradictory progressive and conservative positions. Another notable characteristic of the collection, and one indicative of the centrality of gender to public debate, is the number of writers who also produced political pamphlets in response to the American War of Independence and to the French Revolution and government reaction in Britain. The texts in *Conduct Literature for Women, 1770–1830* have been selected to offer a representative political range across the whole of the time span, as well as to reflect the changing preoccupation of conduct writers over that period; for example, the increasing concern with the conduct of the lower orders. Wherever possible, complete texts have been reprinted and, when extracting has been necessary, substantial excerpts have been selected that contain the main substance of the work. Two whole volumes have been given to Elizabeth Hamilton's *Letters on the Elementary Principles of Education* in the belief that this is a major and original text of the period that needs to be available for reading alongside the works of Wollstonecraft and More to provide a more comprehensive view of women's most significant thinking.

Of the various scholarly debates as to the balance of pessimism and optimism to be seen in the changes to women's position, the impact of separate spheres ideology has received most extended research. The idea that women's lives were increasingly confined to domesticity has been challenged by historians like Linda Colley and Amanda Vickery.[1] They argue that there is considerable evidence to suggest that, in fact, women's activities outside the home continued to expand throughout the period, both in range and level of involvement. Charitable work became more professionalised and increasingly women took leading executive roles in those organisations that had special relevance to women's needs.[2] Colley has demonstrated that women saw themselves as active patriots, assuming public roles in national celebrations and intervening in political affairs that touched upon 'woman' issues.[3] The flourishing concert halls, theatres, art galleries and lecture halls found in most cities and towns were sustained by the cultural interests and activities of women as much as men. John

1 Amanda Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter: Women's Lives in Georgian England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation*, pp. 251–96.

2 For a discussion of women's increasing involvement see, F. K. Prochaska, 'Women in English Philanthropy 1790–1830', *International Review of Social History,* 19 (1974), pp. 426–45.

3 Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation*, see particularly her discussion of the Queen Caroline controversy, pp. 279–82.

Brewer comments that the 'power of women was seen in almost every cultural form'.[1]

It has to be said that without exception the conduct books in this collection subscribe to the view that women's primary role is that of wife and mother and that her proper sphere is the domestic. This is the main theme of Richard Polwhele's two sermons, the first to denounce the 'contempt of domestic duties [which] is evidently the prevailing vice of our modern women' (Volume 2, p. 177), and the second to praise those who adorn 'their proper sphere' (p. 197). Nature, Polwhele tells the woman reader, intended her to remain in confinement: 'Her's *[sic]* is the silent and sequestered path' (p. 209). It could be argued that Polwhele's insistence indicates that modern women were indeed finding alternative spheres of activity and interest. His views on women are characterised by a backward-looking conservatism that seems outdated by the end of the century. Yet, turning to the newer conduct writing addressed to poorer working-class women by Hannah More and Anna Kent (see Volume 6), we find the same strictures against gadding from home and the same threats of the inevitable slide into wickedness that will befall any woman who looks for pleasure out of doors. In texts such as these, the domestic ideal was being refashioned as a disciplinary code for the labouring woman.

Yet it is equally significant that even so conservative a writer as Polwhele feels constrained to admit that the middle-class woman he addresses should not convert her home 'into a cloyster' (p. 218). Other writers are more explicitly critical of the narrowing of the mind and sympathies that can result from too much domestic confinement. In Joseph Towers's *Dialogues concerning the Ladies* (1785), a young woman, representative of the modern generation, asserts that, while she wants to acquire the domestic knowledge incumbent upon females, she also desires 'knowledge of an higher kind', since a woman who is too engrossed by her ordinary duties cannot 'rise above the vulgar standard, or entertain any sentiments of a refined or elevated nature' (this volume, p. 117). Elizabeth Hamilton, in *Letters on the Elementary Principles of Education* (1803), uses the biblical account of Martha and Mary to argue that Christ was critical of Martha's overdutiful attention to the domestic (Volume 4, pp. 263–4). Lucy Aikin, in *Epistles on Women* (1810), associates domesticity with dullness and monotony. Perhaps most significantly, the conventional Mrs William Parkes, in *Domestic Duties* (1828), firmly states that too much enclosure within the walls of the home 'has a tendency to circumscribe the powers of the mind, and even to contract the affections' (Volume 6,

1 John Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (London: HarperCollins, 1997), p. 77.

p. 282). She continues that, while the home should contain the strongest affections of women, 'I have yet to learn if these are sufficient … to close them against a larger field for their exercise and employment' (p. 283).

Within the texts of *Conduct Literature for Women, 1770–1830* the advocacy of wider responsibilities in a way that erases or confuses the boundaries between public and private worlds is more pervasive than explicit criticism of the domestic sphere as women's sole and proper preoccupation. Motherhood, in particular, is persistently represented in these texts as a national duty, residing in women and meriting recognition and commendation by men. In *Female Tuition* (1786), the conservative John Moir calls women to that tender duty of motherhood that 'you owe to Heaven, to your country, to your own hearts' (this volume, p. 287). By 1815, in *Practical Hints to Young Females*, Ann Taylor was expressing the national importance of mothers in even grander terms: 'The mothers of those who have decided the fate of empires were once young wives, such as you are; and, perhaps, the happiness or misery of thousands then unborn originated in their conduct' (Volume 6, p. 18). It is tempting to dismiss such rhetoric as compensatory flattery aimed at retaining women in contented domesticity. Yet belief in the rhetoric must have influenced the way women understood themselves as citizens dignified by a national role. The new emphasis upon the child's early experiences and upbringing, flowing from the ideas of Locke and Rousseau, certainly brought new status and confidence to women as mothers, but as always there was a downside. If women as mothers could vitally influence the moral tone of society, they could equally be held to blame for all that was wrong. Guilty mothers, either neglectful or over-indulgent, figure as prominently in these texts as do commendations of maternal virtue. Cartwright concludes *Letters on Female Education* (1777; this volume) with a fictional plot that turns upon a grotesquely selfish mother – a stereotype that from then on haunts literary, advisory, medical and religious texts.

The authority and confidence acquired by women in their social role as mothers underwrote the extension of their responsibilities into the public sphere of charitable activities, especially among the poor. Again this is a pervasive theme in many of the texts in this collection. John Bennett urges young women to take up Sunday School teaching and to deliver tracts. Ann Taylor encourages housewives to build up a kitchen library of improving books for the servants and, of course, Taylor herself, as well as Hannah More and Anna Kent, wrote tracts for distribution to the poor. Elizabeth Hamilton was closely involved with the Edinburgh House of Industry that aimed to assist older women thrown out of employment and to train young women 'to

habits of industry and virtue'.[1] In several of the texts, women's role is viewed in the broader terms of effecting an ameliorating influence upon class tensions and the more brutalising aspects of individualism and competition. John Moir admits that young men are susceptible to the allurements of wealth and pride that render them 'criminally callous to the workings of humanity', whereas women seldom succumb so totally to these evil dispositions (this volume, p. 340). He goes on to depict a world constituted of selfishness and craftiness where all 'struggled hard to over-reach and take every possible advantage' of all. It is only, he concludes, due to the preservation of some humanity, candour and truth (qualities he has associated with women) 'that we do not literally devour one another' (p. 353). Ann Taylor suggests that women's promotion of domestic virtues to the 'numerous class' is an effectual means of 'increasing national prosperity' (Volume 6, pp. 11–12).

There is a yet more pervasive way in which the private and the public were intertwined in women's lives and in their own and men's understanding of their social role and importance. As John Brewer has shown, notions of culture and taste acquired almost political significance in the eighteenth century. An appreciation and cultivation of 'the arts', Brewer argues, came to be seen as 'defining a field of human endeavour'.[2] It was a project of 'politeness' aimed at taming the dangerous violence of party spirit, political factionalism and religious intolerance and of bringing into being an urbane, modern, commercial community sharing cultural values and interests. Women, Brewer suggests, were central to this socio-political endeavour.

There is significant evidence in the texts reprinted in this collection to support this thesis. Although 'domestic' is a term that frequently occurs in relation to women, it is not often used in opposition to 'public'. Most frequently the domestic world is opposed to the fashionable world and men as well as women are seen as participating in both. Parkes, for example, writes of men's desire to 'cultivate domestic tastes' (Volume 6, p. 297). To do so is seen as a sign not only of modern cultivation but also of patriotism. Love of home has become an English virtue for both sexes. Within this constellation of values, home is understood as the site where social responsibilities and cultural values are nurtured. In *Letters on Female Education* (1777), Cartwright insists that young girls should not be encouraged to remain silent in company but rather to benefit from conversation in order to enlarge their ideas and improve their taste. This is the only way to ensure that they become 'agreeable members of society' (this volume, p. 63). For

1 Quoted in Kelly, *Women, Writing and Revolution*, p. 277.
2 Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination*, p. 87.

this reason, she urges that rather than public amusements, social parties in the home should be encouraged (p. 64). In what Janet Todd has called the 'serious decades' of the turn of the century, Ranelagh and similar fashionable meeting places fell into neglect and disrepair.[1] The home increased in importance as a social space for the interchange of morning visits, musical evenings and dinner parties. As Frances Parkes makes clear, the maintenance of a cultivated network of acquaintances was regarded as a social responsibility in which a wife worked in partnership with her husband.

It would seem then, that these texts provide no evidence of an intensification of separate spheres ideology over the sixty-year span that they cover. On the contrary, there is some indication of a modification, within the prescriptive ideals, towards a broader view of women's social and cultural roles. As noted, domestic virtues are often evoked in opposition to the vices of fashionable life and in this discourse gender identity is not the central issue. Men, too, should be domestic. It is, however, a class-inflected discourse, promulgating the ideals of middle-class respectability against aristocratic worldliness and corruption and undertaking the task of promoting domesticity as a moralising influence upon the lower orders. As Nancy Armstrong has pointed out, the domestic was from the first political and public.[2]

An expansion of female education also casts some doubt upon the view that there was an increasing insistence upon domesticity as women's only proper sphere. By the end of the eighteenth century there was extensive provision of day and boarding schools for girls. As Susan Skedd has shown, managing schools and teaching in them provided important employment opportunities for women.[3] Moreover, despite criticisms, at least a proportion of the schools provided a sound and even ambitious education. Three of the writers within this collection were involved with successful educational enterprises: Thomas Broadhurst, Hannah More and Frances Parkes. One of the more celebrated pupils attending Parkes's school was Elizabeth Gaskell. There was considerable criticism of this growth in female education, especially of boarding schools, largely on the grounds that such institutions only taught their pupils polite accomplishments with a view to success within the marriage market. Both Mary Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) and Hannah

1 Todd, *The Sign of Angellica*, p. 201.

2 Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

3 'Women Teachers and the Expansion of Girls' Schooling in England, c.1760–1820' in Hannah Barker and Elaine Chalus (eds), *Gender in Eighteenth-Century England* (Harlow: Longman, 1997), pp. 101–25.

More in *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education* (1799) were in agreement in their disapprobation of this emphasis in much female education. There was also widespread disquiet at the idea of daughters of artisans and small traders and shop-keepers receiving education that would make them dissatisfied with husbands from their own class. Many moralists warned that this was a sure route to prostitution. These views are prevalent in the texts within this collection. John Bennett, in particular, gives an extended fictionalised account of the artificial precociousness of a Lady Harriett just arrived from boarding school: 'not yet fourteen years old, she has … the airs and forwardness of a woman' (*Letters to a Young Lady* (1789); Volume 2, p. 148). A later writer, Miss Hatfield, makes a similar point to Wollstonecraft when she claims that girls are offered superficial knowledge and external advantages and thereby encouraged, at a very early age, 'to suppose themselves to have been born only to attract the regard and admiration of the opposite sex' (*Letters on the Importance of the Female Sex* (1803); Volume 5, p. 45).

Yet despite the pervasiveness of such criticism, there was, by the last decades of the eighteenth century, widespread acceptance of the desirability of women's education. This is in stark contrast to general opinion in the early decades. While a total denial of women's intellectual capacities was no longer acceptable, conservative opinion resorted to two lines of argument to justify a continued restriction of the curriculum offered to girls. In conjunction with the argument that men and women were designed by nature and by God for separate spheres of action and responsibilities, it was affirmed that the sexes were endowed with equally valuable but different mental attributes. In addition, an insistence on the inherent weakness and corruption of human nature not only opposed claims based upon perfectibility as God's intent for all of humankind, it equally shifted the emphasis towards humility and self-doubt rather than aspiration. In *Conduct Literature for Women, 1770–1830*, the most dogmatic insistence upon differences in mental capacities between men and women is found in texts written around the era of the Revolution in France. This could be taken as evidence that the 1790s did indeed form a political watershed between progressive and conservative agendas.

The texts reprinted in this collection that were published before the French Revolution are comparatively positive. John Moir is generally conservative in his views yet, in *Female Tuition* (1786), he asserts that women, as well as men, 'share the prerogative of intelligence' while he robustly dismisses those who would ridicule women's learning as proceeding from ignorance and prejudice (this volume, pp. 347, 339). In *Dialogues concerning the Ladies* (1785), women's capacity for classical learning, the most carefully guarded preserve of masculine knowledge,

is praised and, in *Letters on Female Education* (1777), Cartwright cautions against teaching a girl the learned languages, only to qualify this with 'unless [she is] strongly impelled by genius' (this volume, p. 58).

By contrast, texts from the Revolutionary period are decidedly more negative. In *Letters to a Young Lady* (1789), Bennett tells his female readers that taste and imagination are the prominent excellencies of the female mind, whereas study of politics, philosophy, mathematics or metaphysics 'would render you *unwomanly* indeed' (Volume 2, p. 67). In writing, he says, while a man attends to the niceties of grammar, 'a *woman* gives us the effusions of her soul' (p. 71). Polwhele, writing in 1791, provides the most negative views of women's intellectual capacities and requirements. Responding to the current arguments in favour of female education, Polwhele concedes that providing women with stores of knowledge may furnish them with resources against a time of adversity but concludes that where such learning has been once beneficial it has a thousand times proved the bane of happiness, inspiring in women 'an over-weening pride, and a contempt for the humbler offices of domestic life' (Volume 2, p. 208). Laetitia Hawkins, in *Letters on the Female Mind* (1801), also makes a firm division between male and female minds. 'Nature certainly intended a distinction', she says, and although she adds that this difference is not degrading to women, her elaboration of male and female mental attributes certainly is so. Whereas 'Male genius fetches its treasures from the depths of science, and the accumulated wisdom of ages: the female finds her's *[sic]* in the lighter regions of fancy and the passing knowledge of the day' (Volume 2, p. 238). Yet it needs to be said that Hawkins's text is one of the most contradictory works in this collection and she makes it explicitly and implicitly clear that she has the highest respect for her own intellectual abilities. There is no such redeeming ambiguity in Robert Gillet's *The Pleasures of Reason* (1796). This text makes no comment on differences between the sexes, but, addressed to female pupils, it piously instructs the reader that those persons who seriously cultivate knowledge 'are more docile and gentle than other people … less ambitious and … more attentive to their duties' (Volume 2, pp. 390–1).

The texts written in the immediate post-Revolutionary decade of the 1800s articulate the most serious calls for comprehensive female education and thereby seem to question how far the 1790s was a real watershed after which only conservatism prevailed. The most unequivocal assertion of women's equality of intellect with men comes in *Letters on the Importance of the Female Sex* (1803), in which Hatfield makes repeated claims for 'the natural intellectual capacity of females [who are] in every respect equal to those studies which have been more generally appropriated to the use of the opposite sex'

(Volume 5, p. 155). The powers of the female mind, she insists, are equal to the highest attainments, either in 'the boundless ranges of science, or … in the most abstruse and difficult researches' (pp. 42–3). In *Advice to Young Ladies* (1810), Thomas Broadhurst similarly asserts that 'the powers of the female mind are of a nature so eminently distinguished and excellent' as to render women capable 'of very rare and valuable attainments' (Volume 5, p. 303). Also like Hatfield, he buttresses his argument with an appeal to religion, warning that these mental faculties are God-given and so not to be neglected with impunity.

Both Hamilton and Aikin resort to more ambiguity in making their claims for women's inherent intellectual abilities. Hamilton, in particular, seems to deny claims of female equality with masculine mental abilities only to reassert them by implication. In contrast, Aikin, having disclaimed the 'absurd idea' of any footing of equality between the sexes, goes on to insist that both history and daily observation testifies to the fact that 'no talent, no virtue, is masculine alone … [and] that there is not an endowment, or propensity, or mental quality of any kind, which may not be derived from her father to the daughter, to the son from his mother' (Volume 5, pp. 179, 180). Her poem concludes with a call to women to rouse their energies to 'see, and feel, and comprehend the whole' (p. 262) and with a celebration of the intellectual spirit of her sister-in-law, Anna, née Wakefield, whose father had shared with her his classical scholarship. If Hamilton is the least confrontational this is largely because of her urgent pre-occupation with the necessity of tolerance in gender relations and with the destructive effects of intolerance, especially upon women. Her actual estimation of women's abilities is substantiated in the educational programme she advances for the development of their intellectual powers, which is by far the most radical and ambitious of any published at that time.

In the final text in this collection, Frances Parkes's, *Domestic Duties* (1828), the concern with education seems less pressing. Yet the reader is told that the cultivation of mental powers is 'one of the duties which her Creator will expect from her' (Volume 6, p. 344). The married woman is advised to rise early and devote the first part of the morning to study: 'How many languages, how much literature, and how many sciences, even the most abstruse, might be acquired in an ordinary lifetime, were only those morning hours regularly devoted to study' (p. 343). Such studies, it is suggested, 'would not disgrace the stronger sex' (p. 355). The impression the text conveys is that by this time it is a matter of uncontroversial assumption that a well-to-do woman will feel the requirement and have the means to cultivate her mind and pursue intellectual interests, although not in such a way as to

challenge masculine preserves of knowledge. Moreover, Parkes still feels it necessary to warn that 'the improved state of a woman's mind, and the extent of her acquirements, ought rather to be *inferred* from the conversation, than forced and obtruded upon the observation of others' (p. 363).

A recurrent claim justifying the education of women was that an unlearned woman could not provide her husband with rational companionship. In conduct advice, in novels and in journalism an idealised version of affectionate and companionate marriage was invoked in the latter part of the eighteenth century. This new perception of marriage went along with a revision of approved male conduct. Inaugurated in Richard Steele's plays, *The Christian Hero* (1701) and *The Tender Husband* (1705) and continued in the daily editions of the *Spectator* (1711–12), there was a concerted attempt to reform male conduct. In the 1770s, several publications, most notably William Alexander's comprehensive two-volume *History of Women* (1779), became influential in propagating the view that the treatment of women was an index of a society's degree of civilisation or barbarism.[1] Hence national complacency demanded at least public lip service to more liberal views on the proper regard for women. Alexander additionally gave forcible expression to the growing sentiment that women exerted a civilising influence upon the behaviour of men and thus had a significant role to play in the process of national cultivation and moral improvement. Alexander's views are reflected in several of the conduct texts in this collection, most notably in those of Joseph Towers and Lucy Aikin. But how far did this new discourse commending more respectful attitudes towards women and more companionate marriages reflect any real progressive change in actual gender and conjugal relationships? Or to what extent was the rhetoric merely a means of channelling women's desires into an unrealisable romantic ideal and away from aspirations for achievements in the public sphere in competition with men? This latter pessimistic interpretation is the conclusion of Anthony Fletcher, who claims that the very essence of the companionate marriage 'was the subordination of women'.[2]

This question can only be more fully resolved by detailed empirical research into actual marriages during the period. Nevertheless what

1 For William Alexander see the Appendix in Volume 6; other influential writers who took up this topic in less exhaustive form were John Millar, *Observations concerning the Distinction of Ranks* (London: John Murray, 1771); Lord Kames, *Sketches of the History of Man* (2 vols, Edinburgh: W. Creech, 1774); and William Robertson, *History of America* (2 vols, London: W. Strahan, 1777).

2 Fletcher, *Gender, Sex and Subordination*, p. 395.

men and women think should be the case is not totally without effect upon their dealings with others. How, then, do male and female writers represent the relations between men and women in the sixty years spanned by this collection? What degree of gender subordination or equality do they prescribe? Two of the earliest works can certainly be seen as aligned to the project of reforming male behaviour. Cartwright is critical of uncontrolled ill humour on the part of husbands, claiming that lack of harmony in the home leads children to imitate 'the acts of tyranny they every day see practised' (this volume, p. 30). In one of her fictional tales a thoughtlessly selfish young man is dismissed as a suitor by a young woman who roundly tells him that he should be shunned by all women of character on account of his 'unmanly and ungenerous disposition' (p. 42). At least in print women are accorded the power to discipline excesses of masculine conduct. In the same tale, a young man who resists the conventional defence of male honour in the form of duelling is praised by Cartwright. While some might look upon his refusal as cowardice, she says, 'the truly noble-minded will applaud' (p. 41). The form of *Dialogues concerning the Ladies* (1785) makes it difficult to associate Towers's own views with any particular characters, but the discursive form itself, with its urbane exchange of opinions between men and women, is perhaps intended to provide a model for gender relations. On the whole the male characters speak more authoritatively than the female, but there are repeated assertions of women's cultivating influence upon men and robust attacks upon both male gallantry and satire upon women. Furthermore, this text contains the most radical rejection of women's formal and legal subordination to men within marriage. The irrepressible Miss Ashburham insists 'But I must confess, that I do not think this virtue of silent obedience a great acquisition. I do not apprehend that I have any genius for it. I think I could sooner learn geometry' (this volume, p. 174).

Sadly, this iconoclastic woman's voice does not recur in any subsequent work in this collection. Indeed, the majority of the male-authored texts provide striking evidence in support of the thesis that the idealisation of women, as the softening influence upon men's lives and behaviour, was simply the polite face of their continued subordination. John Moir begins *Female Tuition* (1786) by drawing attention to the lasting impression women's example makes upon 'the manners of the other sex' but he goes on almost immediately to argue that they 'should be accustomed to the earliest habits of subjection and obedience' (this volume, pp. 266, 271). Typically, he asserts men's need of women's domestic affections but clearly perceives these feminine virtues solely as attributes designed to contribute to men's contentment: 'Nature has constituted them [women] the delight of the

other sex, and it would ill become you to counteract, by negligence or inattention, her generous design' (p. 351). It is noteworthy that a pervasive undercurrent of anxiety about and expectation of women's discontent runs through Moir's book, even though it was published well before the Revolutionary violence in France which is so often cited as initiating fear and hostility towards women's demands.

John Bennett is the writer who most unctuously flatters women readers with sentimental litanies in praise of the feminine. Friendship with a woman, he declares 'is the richest cordial of life' and without it men's 'manners have not their proper softness; our morals their purity, and our souls feel an uncomfortable void' (Volume 2, pp. 20–1). Yet, as with Moir, the apparent admiration for womanly excellence is clearly thought of entirely in terms of ministering to men's requirements. A woman's 'meek benevolence, sympathy and softness' is what affords her 'such a wonderful ascendancy over our affections', Bennett enthuses. But this 'ascendancy' consists of nothing more than the privilege of allowing men 'to repose any of our secrets, our concerns, or our sorrows, in her sympathizing breast' (p. 34).

At least Richard Polwhele cannot be accused of any attempt at flattering women into compliance, stating unequivocally that 'a good wife is yielding and submissive both in her words and actions' (Volume 2, p. 202). However, it is not only male writers who reiterate the need for subordination of women. Laetitia Hawkins warns her fellow women that 'nature, notwithstanding all modern levelling, has made [men] our lords and masters' (Volume 2, p. 263). Yet, she does recognise that there has been a shift in the relations between the sexes so that 'we are now not only considered as their companions, but they are ready to confess us in some points their superiors, and at least to *listen* to our advice. Thus all subordination arising from conscious superiority on the man's part, and confessed inferiority on the woman's, is annihilated' (pp. 309–10). Since it goes against the grain of Hawkins's traditional conservatism to admit this, it seems there must have been some real evidence forming the basis for her observation. Nevertheless, she recognises that these changes are concessions made by those who retain power; women's newly acquired rights are not 'unalienable … Let us then, if we do not love darkness, be very careful to do nothing to provoke our superiors to take away the lamp they had allowed us' (pp. 263–4).

Strikingly, the most overt assault on male power comes in those texts that were published just after the 1790s by three women writers, all of whom remained unmarried. Throughout much of her work, Hamilton explores and analyses the workings of power and the destructive consequences of intolerance and prejudice. In *Letters on the Elementary Principles of Education* (1803), she focuses upon the damag-

ing effects on individual and social life of the prejudice against women instilled in boys from their earliest years. She argues that through an association of ideas they acquire an aversion or disgust for the very idea of weakness that they come to project onto women. Men's tyrannous treatment of women thus becomes an habitual defence against the vulnerability that they fear to discover in themselves. This is by far the most complex understanding of men's psychic need to subordinate women. Hatfield simply describes men's restriction of women's knowledge to the domestic as 'a masculine plot' aimed at enhancing men's importance 'by the exercise of greater power' (Volume 5, p. 40). She further asserts that women attain a 'higher degree of perfection than the opposite sex – whose violent and self-ungoverning spirit requires, sometimes, all the influence of feminine virtues to soften and correct' (pp. 35–6). Hannah More also conceded that women had advantages over men when it came to exercising moral virtue, but her argument was based upon women's more dependent and timorous nature.[1] Hatfield, by contrast, offers a more affirmative account of women's moral capacities; one which moves beyond claims, like those of Bennett, that women are designed to sympathise with men. Women's virtue, according to Hatfield, is needed to correct men.

In *Epistles on the Character and Condition of Women* (1810), Lucy Aikin ironises male claims to superiority based upon nothing more than physical strength: 'Nature endows him with superior force, / Superior wisdom then I grant, of course' (Volume 5, p. 187). Much of her work is devoted to tracing the brutal tyranny men have offered women throughout world history. In her revision of the myth of Genesis, it is Eve who wakens Adam into spiritual life. The Edenic partnership of man and woman was one of equality, Aikin claims, and Eve was not perceived by Adam as a 'Poor instrument of bliss, and tool of ease, / Born but to serve, existing but to please' (p. 194). The divinely ordained equality of men and women was lost with the loss of Eden which, in Aikin's account, was brought about not by Eve's sin but by Adam's violence. The Christian promise of redemption and particularly the Christian sacrament of monogamous marriage hold out the promise that the egalitarian relationship between men and women can be regained. Unlike the works of Hamilton and Hatfield, Aikin's poem articulates a somewhat yearning belief in the possibility of romantic love between the sexes despite her critique of men's abuse of power.

1 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*, 3rd edn (2 vols, London: T. Cadell, Jr, and W. Davies, 1799), Vol. II, p. 33.

Nevertheless, in common with Hatfield and Hamilton, Aikin's actual representations of domesticity are almost wholly negative, emphasising monotony and restriction. The 'timorous mothers' of English history are envisaged as 'Wrapt in a meek monotony of life, / Humbly content to pace with duteous round / Their little world' (p. 253). Hatfield writes of the exclusion of women from the rational enjoyment of mental intercourse once they marry. As wives they must perforce 'listen with wonder and awe at his [her husband's] surpassing knowledge', their silence 'consecrated to masculine dignity' (p. 77). Hamilton exclaims with ironic bitterness at 'the picture of domestic felicity' in which selfishness predominates and the 'darling wife is in reality a bosom slave: a being who is required to have neither will, nor feelings, nor inclination of her own' (Volume 3, pp. 307–8).

Certainly, then, both the flattering representation of women's influence upon men, as articulated in male texts like that of Bennett, and the negative view of marriage, prevailing in female-authored texts, would seem to support the view that the companionate marriage ideal was indeed a myth that functioned to sustain women's conjugal subordination. Yet, the forthright criticisms of male abuse of power and the depiction of marriage as repressive in the writing of women like Hamilton, Hatfield and Aikin also demonstrate that the ideology of marital partnership was far from seamless or universally accepted. Thomas Broadhurst's *Advice to Young Ladies* (1810), however, offers a significantly different and positive view of marriage as an egalitarian relationship. While the study of household good is unquestionably important for marital comfort and happiness, he says, it is certainly not the only ingredient. The purest pleasures of domestic life derive from 'the sweet interchange of rational sentiment, from enlightened and animated conversation, and from the mutual communication of knowledge' (Volume 5, p. 315). Broadhurst is speaking within the context of his actual marriage, which was also a professional partnership, running a school. It is noteworthy that whenever he speaks of his wife he does not refer to her by that term, which conventionally evoked a sphere of domestic duties. He speaks instead of 'my partner in life', suggesting that there may have been some egalitarian actualities behind the myth of companionate marriage.

Both Taylor and Parkes, writing in the 1820s, represent themselves authorially as married women. Both ostensibly accept the wife's subordination to her husband but the main impression conveyed by their texts is one of female confidence. This is perhaps most forcibly substantiated in the whole chapter Taylor addresses to the husband in which she assumes the right, as a woman, to instruct him in appropriate conjugal behaviour. There is little sense of deference to 'lords and masters', still less of flattery, when she declares that a man who is a

'saint abroad, and its opposite at home, is an offensive compound' (Volume 6, p. 143). More intriguing is her obvious aim to shape men's behaviour towards their wives in conformity to women's romantic desires. Most women, she instructs her male readers, 'would be more gratified by the presentation of a flower, accompanied with expressions of tenderness, than by the most costly indulgences they could procure for themselves' (p. 147). Parkes offers the conventional advice to a young wife that her husband is at the centre of her social, domestic and personal obligations (Volume 6, p. 282). Yet the emphasis as a whole falls far more upon the opening declaration that a married woman is called upon 'to lead, to regulate, and to command' (p. 276). This view of her responsibilities is applied with particular force to family relationships and to the cultural and social status of the home. 'The case is very rare', Parkes claims, 'in which a woman does not possess sufficient power to govern her family … The habits, pursuits, and inclinations of her husband are, generally, influenced by hers; her children are still more the subjects of her government' (p. 358). Both Taylor and Parkes, like all the other authors in *Conduct Literature for Women, 1770–1830*, are constructing prescriptive texts, yet there is a shift of ground. Whereas conduct writers throughout the eighteenth century and earlier were largely concerned with what men expect of women, these two latter writers explicitly or implicitly are more ready to consider what women have a right to expect of men.

The ideal of companionate marriage developed largely within the wider discourse of sentimentality. The cult of sentiment has also been viewed, both by recent historians and by eighteenth-century moralists, as offering dubious advantages to women. Undoubtedly, there was a striking shift from the traditional view of women as shallow, vain and wholly governed by sensuality to the late eighteenth-century idealisation of femininity as inherently delicate, modest, gentle and affectionate. Yet this more positive view of womanly nature derived from belief in the biological gendering of bodies. Women's delicacy and susceptible sensibilities were understood as inevitable manifestations of their more finely-wrought nervous system and frailer physique, rendering them emotionally vulnerable and unfitted for the rigours of the public world. All of the conduct writers in this collection, women as well as men, progressives as well as conservatives, subscribe to stereotypical womanly virtues of delicacy, modesty and affectionate sensibility.

John Bennett is most fulsome, referring the especial support women require from religion to 'The timidity, arising from the natural weakness and delicacy of your frame; the numerous diseases to which you are liable; that exquisite sensibility, which, in many of you, vibrates to

the slightest touch of joy or sorrow' (Volume 2, p. 23). Later he describes '*true*, female delicacy' as a '*native* feeling' that would 'tremble, like a sensitive plant' at even the remotest approach of anything 'that could stain the delicacy of her *mind*' (p. 123). Clearly, such plant-like modesty is not to be equated with any rational moral choice on the part of a woman or intelligent adherence to decided principles. Even the redoubtable Laetitia Hawkins argues that 'all the charms of female tenderness and female *weakness*' would be sacrificed should women attempt to be politicians (Volume 2, p. 260). While the texts thus consolidate an idealisation of the properly feminine around notions of natural delicacy and sensitivity, the vices which in earlier conduct writing were associated stereotypically with women generally, are now attributed only to the class extremes of fashionable aristocratic women and lower-class women. Both these classes are used to represent the evils of women who gossip, gad from home, pursue amusement and indulge in sexual promiscuity.

Yet when the writers turn to sensibility per se their views are more ambivalent. This is partly because sensibility as understood by people at the time was a complex terrain of shifting meanings and values. Moreover, by the 1790s the whole cult of sensibility, and especially its most popular form, the romantic novel, was under widespread attack. There were two main lines of criticism. The first was to separate out what was termed sickly or affected sensibility for censorship. The targets of this criticism were almost invariably female, women who professed excessive emotions in response to trivial occurrences such as terror at the sight of a spider or overwhelming grief at the death of a bird. Such effusions came to be suspected of a snobbish affectation to refinement. Undoubtedly this accusation contained a fair degree of truth, but that in itself suggests that women at the time believed there were advantages for them in espousing the cult of sensibility. The second line of criticism was directed at sensibility ungoverned by rationality or moral principles. This was by far the most widespread concern, aimed especially at novel-reading young women, and voiced alike by Wollstonecraft and More. Critics claimed that the unqualified value bestowed, in sentimental literature, upon the impulses of strong feeling and the spontaneous passions of the heart rendered naïve young women vulnerable to the seductive promptings of unscrupulous men. Moreover, critics asserted, moral principles were often rejected as cold and unfeeling in sentimental writing, while vices were glamorised as manifestations of a nobly passionate intensity.

The changing concern with sensibility can be tracked through the texts that comprise *Conduct Literature for Women, 1770–1830*. There is no criticism of the cult of sentimentality in Cartwright's *Letters on Female Education* (1777); on the contrary, mothers are encouraged to

'humanize' their children by using every means to excite tender feelings for any object of compassion, even those of 'little buzzing insects' since 'there is reason to believe that the sensations of the smallest of the insect-tribe are as exquisite as those of creatures of the most enlarged dimension' (this volume, pp. 28–9). In later texts, mothers are warned against encouraging any such excessive sentiments in their children. In *Female Tuition* (1786) by John Moir and *Letters to a Young Lady* (1789) by John Bennett, cautions against sickly or affected sensibility have begun to appear but sentiment is still represented in predominantly positive terms. Indeed, Bennett's whole text could well be described as one of sickly sentimentality.

The strongest attack upon the dangers that sensibility poses to female susceptibility comes from three women writers: Hawkins, Hamilton and Hatfield. Hamilton inveighs against the 'swarm of heterogeneous absurdities' that daily issue from the press under the name of novels which stimulate the powers of imagination while those of judgment are allowed to lie dormant. Under the power of fanciful invention 'the laws of nature [are] violated; the course of the passions misrepresented; the principles of morality set at defiance' (Volume 4, p. 242). Hatfield deplores 'the fashion to impute sensibility to the female character … as the distinguishing trait of a lovely and superior mind'; in fact, she claims, it brings about the most fatal consequences to 'Female Virtue and Happiness' (Volume 5, p. 13). When she comes to elaborate these fatal consequences, her own language seems to take on the melodramatic tone of sentimental novels. This raises the question of how far the repeated claims of countless young women betrayed into losing their virtue having been first beguiled by romances is itself a fiction, or at best a narrative based upon slender evidence. Nonetheless, the articulation of women's susceptibility to passionate feeling, even if only within novels, could be welcomed as recognition of the existence of female desire in counteraction to the repetitive harping upon delicacy and modesty as inherent to the female nature. From this perspective, the attack on sensibility can be interpreted as repressive, as yet another attempt to police women's sexuality. Yet it may be significant that the strongest warnings come from women writers. There is undeniable force in the argument that only self-possession offers women autonomy over their own bodies in an age before reliable contraception and in which the double standard of morality ensured that only the woman paid for discovered transgression of moral codes.

In the later texts by Aikin, Broadhurst, Taylor and Parkes, sensibility no longer appears as such an important issue for women's conduct. The vociferous complaints against its effects, strengthened by the imputation, in conservative writing, that it was implicated in radical

politics, brought an end to the flood of sentimental literature. Yet the constellation of ideas associated with the cult of sentimentality was never comprehensively rejected. Too much was at stake. It provided men with a way of thinking about women that seemed to indicate their own cultivated tolerance in acceding to women certain superiorities, but which, in effect, superimposed upon the feminine an emotional susceptibility and physical vulnerability. Yet for women, too, the notion of sensibility had advantages to offer. It brought about an expanded sense of female subjectivity in terms of a much more fully recognised emotional complexity and a capacity for artistic appreciation and performance. This recognition brought into being more sympathy for women's interiority. In the texts in this collection there is evidence of a greater concern with women's emotional and mental wellbeing than is to be found in earlier conduct writing. John Moir writes of the 'inquietudes and fatigues' of domestic life (this volume, p. 370). Taylor stresses that wives and mothers require fresh air and exercise despite the most pressing household cares, and she admonishes husbands to be attentive and sympathetic to the emotional needs of their wives. Parkes suggests that too much confinement within the narrowly domestic leads to a restless anxiety of mind upon imagined ills such as supposed diseases of the children. Furthermore, it was primarily the supposition of women's more responsive sympathies and moral sensibility that justified their increasing involvement in charitable and welfare activities among the poor.

Sentimentality was undoubtedly instrumental in opening up increased access for women into the public world of print culture. Writing, by the end of the eighteenth century, had become a means by which more women could hope to earn an independent livelihood, especially by producing novels to meet the demands of the expanding circulating libraries. But women were also receiving increasing public respect in more regarded literary fields as poets, historians, philosophers and serious novelists. In 1777, for example, Richard Samuel exhibited a painting of *The Nine Living Muses of Great Britain* at the Royal Academy. The group portrait celebrated the artists and writers Elizabeth Carter, Anna Laetitia Barbauld, Angelica Kauffman, Elizabeth Anne Sheridan, Catharine Macaulay, Elizabeth Montagu, Hannah More, Elizabeth Griffith and Charlotte Lennox. In the conduct texts published here, there is a new willingness among the male authors to praise the achievements of contemporary women writers as well as invoking exceptional learned women of the past. Almost all the female-authored texts in the collection convey a sense of the writer addressing a female constituency or community. There seems to be a

conscious awareness of what Lucy Aikin terms 'the sisterhood of womankind' (Volume 5, p. 199). Most of the women writers in the collection adopt an egalitarian relationship to the female reader rather than assuming a posture of exceptionality. Yet, a more negative view of this woman-centred writing informs the argument that this was the only legitimate constituency permitted female authors. Although increasing numbers of women found a way into print culture, it has been argued that they were restricted to those genres, like novels and advice writing, deemed suitable to the lesser talents of the female mind.

Conduct Literature for Women, 1770–1830 does afford some evidence that seems to support this pessimistic view that women writers were restricted to 'feminine' genres. With only one exception, all of the male writers produced other publications that participated vigorously and directly in the political debates of the time. Six of the female authors – Cartwright, Hawkins, Hamilton, Hatfield, Taylor and More – wrote novels. Yet this opposition is not as stark as that categorisation suggests. Hamilton's first novels engage directly with the political issues of the 1790s while her other works move across the traditional male domains of philosophy, psychology and ancient history. Hannah More's writing career encompasses a whole range of generic forms and, while Hawkins asserts that women are disqualified by both nature and their education from engagement with politics, her *Letters on the Female Mind* is just that – an extensive and rational political analysis. Aikin appropriates the more prestigious poetic forms for her *Epistles*, while the ambitious scope of her theme exceeds anything that could be deemed restrictively 'feminine'. What this collection does confirm is the flexible ability of women writers to cross generic and discursive boundaries.

It has been suggested, however, that women are more pervasively trapped within discourse than by any mere restriction to certain forms and genres. The power of dominant value systems derives from their naturalisation within discourse so that the structures of social reality appear to be the way things inevitably are. Within a patriarchal order, women, it is argued, will be as wholly enclosed within this way of understanding reality as men, and women's writing, equally, will represent and sustain that political actuality as natural. This raises very complex issues of interpretation. Certainly all of the women writers in this collection subscribe to the view that domesticity is at the centre of a woman's sphere of responsibilities. Yet does an assertion of the equal value and importance of the virtues of good mothering, household management, tolerance and sensitivity in social relations to those more public virtues of commercial astuteness, warrior bravery and political ambition constitute entrapment within patriarchal ideology?

Elizabeth Hamilton does have a point when she argues that radicals like Wollstonecraft, who set a higher store upon public achievements than domestic competencies, are in fact overly influenced by a masculine system of values that unthinkingly derogates anything considered feminine. What is required, of course, is equal access for both genders to all fields of human endeavour. Certainly there is little evidence that any of the women writers in this collection could think outside the frame of marriage as the determining parameter of a woman's life. Yet, as we have seen, they were certainly not complacently unquestioning as to the realities of married life underlying the rhetoric of husbandly companionship and respect for women's virtues.

The most striking feature shared by the women writers reprinted here is their confidence of voice. We might not approve of all of their sources of self-esteem, but there is no denying the authority with which they write. It seems condescending to suggest that when Hatfield or Taylor or Parkes invokes the national importance of women as mothers they are unwittingly subscribing to an ideology that worked solely in the interest of men. A belief in the distinctive value of women as women underpinned a readiness to make demands of men and a sense of responsibility for the wider social world in which they lived. Paradoxically one consequence of the separate spheres ideology was that it paved the way for women's greater entry into public life. Yet, it could be argued that when women utilised domestic virtues as a justification for public utterance, they tended to exert a conservative influence, aiming to ameliorate social contention rather than accelerate change.

The period around the French Revolution is often described as a political watershed. The possibilities of radical reform were extinguished in Britain during the 1790s, it is claimed, and the first part of the nineteenth century came to be dominated by conservative reaction. Some commentators locate the beginnings of resistance to reform somewhat earlier, in the aftershock of the loss of the American colonies and in the increasing influence of the evangelical campaign for greater moral seriousness.[1] There is a large consensus, however, that by the end of the 1790s political radicalism was in retreat or on the defensive. In the sphere of gender contention, this conservative offensive culminated in the vituperative attacks upon Mary Wollstonecraft's writing and personal life following the publication of William Godwin's memorial biography of his wife in 1798.

1 Dror Wahrman, '*Percy's* Prologue: from Gender Play to Gender Panic in Eighteenth-Century England', *Past and Present*, 159 (1998), pp. 113–60.

Do the texts in *Conduct Literature for Women, 1770–1830* offer confirmation of the idea that there was a noticeable shutting down of radicalism in gender politics and an increase in conservatism around the 1790s? Or are there continuities to be traced across the sixty-year period? Richard Price has suggested that, while the number of those able to vote in Parliamentary elections actually contracted during the eighteenth century, the extra-Parliamentary activities of women as well as men expanded. This participation of women in wider political campaigning, such as the anti-slavery movement and the agitation against the practice of *sati* in India, increased significantly in the first three decades of the nineteenth century.[1] In terms of direct political representation by means of the vote, it has to be remembered that the majority of men as well as women were without the franchise. It was not until after the Reform Act of 1832 that the continued exclusion of women came to seem especially unreasonable. Even Mary Wollstonecraft, in *A Vindication*, only rather tentatively suggests that women ought to have representatives instead of being arbitrarily governed and she does not elaborate on this.[2] The most radical demand for change to women's subordination comes, within this collection, in *Dialogues concerning the Ladies*, which was written by Wollstonecraft's fellow Dissenter in Stoke Newington, Joseph Towers, in 1785. Miss Ashburnham expresses a hope 'that a parliament, or convocation, may arise, sufficiently liberal and enlightened, to order the promise of obedience made by the woman to be abolished' (this volume, p. 166). This publication is well before the French Revolution and certainly nothing similar occurs in any other text. It is perhaps also indicative of an increasing rigidity in the differentiation of gender attributes that, while Towers uses the epithet 'masculine' to praise Catharine Macaulay Graham's mode of thinking (p. 245), Parkes, in 1828, disparages any evidence of 'masculine courage' in women's manners (Volume 6, p. 370).

Writing in the year of the fall of the Bastille, but before any strong critical reaction in Britain, the evangelical John Bennett is firmly opposed to any political activity on the part of women. His model young lady, Louisa, 'never talks *politicks*: she never foams with anger: she is seldom seen in any *masculine* amusements … she will never canvas for votes at an election' (Volume 2, p. 125). In *Strictures on the*

1 See Price, *British Society 1680–1880*, p. 239. *Sati* is the traditional Hindu practice of a widow burning on her husband's funeral pyre; see Clare Midgley, 'From Supporting Missions to Petitioning Parliament: British Women and the Evangelical Campaign against *Sati* in India 1813–30' in Gleadle and Richardson (eds), *Women in British Politics, 1760–1860*, pp. 74–92.

2 *A Vindication of the Rights of Women: with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects* (1792; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), ch. 9, p. 228.

Modern System of Female Education (1799), leading evangelical propagandist, Hannah More, goes further, declaring female politicians to be 'disgusting and unnatural'.[1] Elizabeth Hamilton is also critical of those she calls 'fair politicians' for their intolerant zeal in party spirit (Volume 4, p. 227). Yet she also takes on Hannah More, who had deplored the contemporary spirit of independence in the young, blaming it upon the prevailing discussion of the rights of man. 'These rights', Hamilton insists, 'which are derided by prejudice, despised by luxury, and trampled on by pride, must be ever held sacred by justice and humanity' (Volume 3, p. 222). There is thus no clear-cut distinction apparent in the texts reprinted here in the degree of radicalism or conservatism articulated before and after the 1790s. There is, indeed, throughout the collection very little in the way of direct political comment. Neither do any of the texts make an explicit call for wider employment opportunities to be made available for women, although Wollstonecraft had raised the issue, as had the much more conservative Priscilla Wakefield in *Reflections on the Present Condition of the Female Sex* (1798).

The most striking evidence of a continuing process of change in women's position is the increasing recognition, within the texts, of women's social responsibilities beyond the domestic. It is important to remember that the public sphere only came into being in the eighteenth century. What is impressive is not so much the disadvantages of access women suffered, severe though these were, but the success and energy with which they colonised the space available. There is a recognisable sense, within *Conduct Literature for Women, 1770–1830*, of women on the move. There has been no golden age within British women's past history when women were not largely confined to the domestic sphere. There was, however, an ideological transformation in the way the home came to be perceived as the location of cultural and social ideals subscribed to by men as well as women. This revaluing of the domestic, in turn, enhanced women's status and their own confidence. Evangelicalism and more general conservative reaction to the Revolution increased rather than diminished the association of the home with national and patriotic virtues.

A proper womanly identity continued to be associated rhetorically with the notions of modesty and delicacy. Yet, as evidenced in the texts in this collection written by women, an increasing contradiction surfaces between the prescriptive ideal and the actuality of women's confidence, authority and experience, as substantiated in the authorial female voices of both conservatives and progressives. Notwithstanding the backward-looking misogyny of a Polwhele or a Thomas

1 More, *Strictures*, Vol. I, p. 6.

Gisborne, the women writers reprinted here reject discursive deference and subordination. They extend the mid-eighteenth-century critique of men's predatory sexual behaviour, to take up arms against marital bullying and insensitivity. After centuries of conduct writing aimed at shaping women to meet the desires of men, we can see the beginnings of a demand that men shape up to the wishes of women. Emphatically, this is not to deny the prevailing legal, political and economic inequalities suffered by women in the 1820s and well beyond; but there appear to be grounds for believing that their position had improved significantly from that of women a century earlier. It seems important to recognise that continuous record of collective female achievement.

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Mrs H. Cartwright: Letters on Female Education

Mrs H. Cartwright, *Letters on Female Education, addressed to a Married Lady* (London: Edward and Charles Dilly, 1777), extract. British Library: RB.23.a.9626.

Nothing is known of Mrs H. Cartwright except her publications, of which this conduct book appears to have been the first. One of its interesting features is that around half way through it turns into a novel that bears only a peripheral concern with women's behaviour in everyday life (after p. 70 in this edition). As well as illustrating the porous interface between the genres of fiction and conduct writing, the shift from one genre into the other within Cartwright's text also suggests that conduct writing may have offered women an approved and reassuringly familiar form by which to enter the public domain of print. Certainly, after *Letters on Female Education*, Cartwright went on to publish five novels, all written in epistolary form: *The Generous Sister* (2 vols, London: J. Bew, 1779), *Memoirs of Lady Eliza Audley* (2 vols, London: Richardson and Urquhart, 1779), *The Duped Guardian: or, the amant malade* (2 vols, London: W. Cass, 1785), *The Platonic Marriage* (2 vols, London: Logographic Press, 1786) and *Retaliation: or, the History of Sir Edward Oswald* (4 vols, London: F. Noble, 1787). Her only other publication was *Letters Moral and Entertaining* (London: J. Macgowan, 1780) which, as the title indicates, consists of a series of letters from fictional characters offering advice and reflections on a variety of moral themes. The first three letters comprise an interchange of conventional advice between Lady Goodville and her friend Hortensia on the proper education of the former's daughter. Another letter warns of the seductiveness of Rousseau's novel *Julie, ou la Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761), especially for the only too susceptible nature of female sensibilities; no sensible parent would allow her daughter to read it.

There is also a letter on the dangerously delusive quality of platonic friendship between an older man and a young woman. The letter-writer insists that such friendships invariably slide into more perilous warmth of feeling. This judgment is revised in a later novel, *The Platonic Marriage*, in which a very young woman, Clara, marries her father's benefactor, the Duke of A., who is over eighty. The relationship is based upon their mutual virtue and platonic affection. While the plot is highly improbable – the Duke's grandson, Lord Edward

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