

Conflicting Feminine Occupations: Marriage and Education in Opposition

By Laura L. Fox

"I am no longer surprised at your knowing only six accomplished women. I rather wonder now at your knowing any."

— Elizabeth Bennett in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813)

Although this statement was first published some thirteen years after the close of the 18th century, Austen's most memorable character, Elizabeth Bennett, in this one succinct statement aptly portrays the negative attitudes against the educated woman of 18th century England. Thought of as the weaker sex both in physical and mental strength, women were neither encouraged nor given the same opportunities for education as their male counterparts. Delarivier Manley also criticizes the motivations, effects, and societal toll that the lack of education of women has caused in her "The New Atlantis". Throughout her text, Manley broadly explores the social factors behind an inadequate education system for women, and specifically, through the character of the Duke, she addresses the role of men in creating this educational disproportionality. Through also connecting women's participation in furthering the stereotypical views against women's education, she relates the underlying social constructs that both men and women engaged in and how these constructs reinforced the negative beliefs about women's education in the time period. Playing the Duke and Charlot alongside each other, Manley gives readers both a male and female point of view by which to interpret and understand the complex issues and attitudes surrounding women's education in 18th century England.

Skillfully demonstrating this struggle for women's education, Manley thus addresses the issues and opposition women faced in gaining an education, and the roles both sexes played in this creating and sustaining this complex social issue. Through the Duke's apprehension and reluctance to educate Charlot, she offers criticism of men's influential roles as the power-holders of society that they used to bring women to an inferior level by preventing them from being educated; through Charlot's strengthened nature and new-found empowerment after being educated, Manley simultaneously encourages women to take control over their own futures and to claim their feminine power by educating themselves. Showing the roles that both sexes played in limiting women's education thus, Manley not only reveals and addresses the multiple societal causes of poor education for women, but also addresses the effects, both positive and negative, that an education had on women's roles and future in 18th century English society.

As the Duke well knows this social stigma against female education not only affected their educational futures, but also their social, economic, and occupational futures. In fact, as Vivien Jones explains, "The rising numbers of educated women were cited as proof of England's cultural superiority, but the girls' boarding schools which proliferated during the century became synonymous with low moral standards and national decline..." (Jones, 99). To compound the problem, the educated woman was in direct opposition to the desirable woman suited for the domestic life and marriage because educated women were "sexually unattractive" (Jones, 99), and thus unable to secure spouses. In a society in which all opportunities for woman's social advance and reputation relied upon marrying well, an education that made her ineligible for such opportunity shut doors to both social acceptance and economic stability. The outcome was the constant struggle women faced in opposition between two occupations: the respectable wife who lived a comfortable but confined life or the disreputable, but intellectually advanced educated woman.

Aside from this life-altering social repercussion, one of the major problems with initiating women's education in 18th century England was the lack of knowledge in just how to educate women. As women historically inhabited only the domestic sphere, the only skills and abilities anyone knew how to teach young ladies were such frivolous leisure activities as needlepoint, singing, dancing, and "the graces of the imagination" (Jones, 100) that were

deemed "appropriate" for young ladies to learn. As Mary Wollstonecraft explains, the female education system was designed to develop that "...weak elegance of mind, exquisite sensibility, and sweet docility of manners supposed to be the sexual characteristics of the weaker vessel..." (Wollstonecraft, 8). Jones explains this vicious cycle of female inferiority in educational pursuits:

Education was the issue on which feminists began to challenge assumptions about women's natural inferiority, offering telling critiques of the conduct-book construction of femininity. The obvious inadequacies of women's education were for them a means of proving the circularity of the conservative view. According to that view, a limited curriculum was justified by a female 'nature' which, the feminists pointed out, the curriculum itself had created. (Jones, 98).

Even outside of the formal classroom, there was "...so little circulation of literature... [that] much of the reading was done at a bookseller's stall, a method obviously impossible to women..." (G. Hill, 312). As this statement evidences, women were prohibited from discovery of what literature was available as they were not allowed into the public sphere, especially to engage in "male" activities, such as reading. All learning, essentially, was to be done from the home, out of the public eye and free from public examination, because the "education of children... particularly of daughters, naturally belongs to the mother" (Jones, 109). From a young age, though, girls learned that there were "...no books but of the most dreary..." and found that it was "...little wonder that the generality of girls grew up without any habit of reading, or of regarding literature as an essential part of their daily lives..." (G. Hill, 312). This lack of education from youth to maturity, then, only served to perpetuate the negative female gender stereotypes of the frivolous, silly, and empty-headed woman.

While modern society recognizes these stereotypes as negative and destructive, though, a frivolous, silly woman was not, in fact, thought of as such a bad thing in 18th century English society. In fact, society:

...disliked in women the evidences of health and of a robust constitution of mind. The effect on ordinary women was to make them shallow and affected. They were not taught to think; they were encouraged to believe that appearances counted for everything, reality for nothing. As long as the exterior was pleasuring, it mattered not what was beneath." (G. Hill, 324)

In effect, the "stupid" woman was preferred over the "intelligent", the "beauty" over the "scholar", as the "great lady of the eighteenth century is... in full dress... seems to live in and for society, to be the leading figure in a great show the great lady of the 18th century" (G. Hill, 339). Consequently, the most highly-regarded, highly-sought-after woman was not one who was formally educated, but rather, a lady who was simultaneously beautiful, intriguing, and socially-adept at enhancing his social prestige and influence on society was beneficial socially, economically, and politically for the husband.

Another dominant reason for the primacy of exterior beauty over intellectual development seems to stem from men's decision to purposefully keep women ignorant of their rights and capacities, which, if known, might elevate them to the level of men. Or, as one unidentified male author wrote in 1735:

If we reflect how extremely ignorant all young Women are as to points in Law, and how their Education and way of Life shuts them out from the knowledge of their true interest in almost all things, we shall find that their Trust and Confidence in the Man they love, and Inability to make use of the Proper Means to guard against his Falsehood, leave few in a Condition to make use of that Precaution. (Unknown, from B. Hill, 201)

While this sentiment seems in some ways to pity women's ignorance to their own legal rights and liberties by revealing the depth of the problems that being uneducated caused for women in 18th century England, the author seems also to revel in the fact that women are being so easily, and blindly, led by the men they trust into dangerous, oppressive social conditions. That is, these supposedly "trustworthy" men are the same men who originated the problem of women's lack of education in the first place. Through such an expression of sentiment, the author reveals the true nature of the poor educational system

for women: the lack of education of women is simply symptomatic of the root cause – man’s desire to keep them purposefully ignorant so that they abide by and follow man’s laws and leadership.

Yet, while this view of woman as a beautiful, gossiping, consumerism-driven lady of ignorance seems to have been preferred by many men, it was also chastised and ridiculed by those who saw the absurdity of an empty-headed woman who was guided solely by her passions and desires, instead of her reason and intellect. One poet who evidences this disdain for the false, uneducated, painted lady was Alexander Pope, who, in his *The Rape of the Lock* (1714) scorns the shallowness and trivialness of this type of woman:

And now, unveiled, the Toilet stands displayed,
Each Silver Vase in mystic Order laid.
First, robed in White, the Nymph intent adores
With Head uncovered, the Cosmetic Powers.
A heav’nly Imagine in the Glass appears,
To that she bends, to that her Eyes she rears;
Th’ inferior Priestess, at her Altar’s side,
Trembling, begins the sacred Rites of Pride...
(Pope, Canto I, 121-128, 635)

Comparing a woman’s toiletries and cosmetics to heavenly imagery and religious paraphernalia, Pope thus mocks the importance women—and society—place upon women’s image, beauty, and cosmetic equipment. By contrasting the significant and heavenly with the insignificant and earthly, Pope shows the falsity and unimportance of women’s physical beauty while inside, they lack the far more substantial and enduring elements: morals and intellect.

Manley first addresses the causes of poor education for women through her portrayal of the Duke and his role in educating Charlot. The consummate male, the Duke expresses all the fears, anxieties, and apprehensions men felt over educating women. For, the Duke knows that, “...if a Lady be too early used to violent Pleasures, it debauches their Tastes forever to any others.” (Manley, 517). Although this statement refers directly to Charlot’s consumption of fiction and the accompanying unease the Duke feels over the knowledge Charlot will gain through reading fiction, this statement can be further extended to include the apprehension he feels over her education in general. For, while he does not prevent her from “reading and improving Books of Education and Piety” (Manley, 517), he does prevent her from “Subjects not necessary to a Lady’s Knowledge” (Manley, 517); that is, knowledge so poisonous that she would begin to understand the workings of the world and the roles of men and women in it. Fiction, that great revealer of the follies, vices, and ulterior motives, threatens to reveal to Charlot the subjugation of women by men, including the type and standard of education that women receive. This male suppression of female intellect and knowledge, Manley seems to suggest in this scene, is the primary reason for the abominable state of female education.

Instead of educating her, then, which would be dangerous both for himself and because it would violate social dictate, the Duke decides that Charlot’s proper and socially-acceptable place is as a “wife”. At the beginning, in fact, the Duke “designed her (in those early Days of his Power) as a Wife for his Son...” (Manley, 517). Unfortunately, in many cases, this male-designed orientation was meant only to educate women in the ways of the home and how to be a good wife and mother, and not to edify their minds. Through this education, the Duke thus not only teaches Charlot her “proper” place as a lady, but also hopes to occupy her time and distract her enough with the frivolous pleasures of life that she would never desire anything more educationally or intellectually. For what more could a lady want when fully-occupied with a busy social calendar, music, plays, country walks, and other such “feminine” entertainment?

Although the Duke’s apprehensions and educational approach for Charlot may have been regarded as “natural” due to the social climate of the time period that established strict roles for the polite relations and acceptable gender roles for men and women, including the exclusion of women from education, his fears also appear to be grounded in much more subversive motives. For, as Manley tells readers, the Duke is: “cunning to conceal, crafty to forsee,

wise to Project, and valiant to undertake” (516). He is also “ambitious” and has a great “desire of gain” by “dissimulation” (517). So painted, the Duke is anything but the honest man desirous of protecting a young innocent girl’s future and education.

Observing that “Charlot had been...denied the gay part of Reading” (521), he realizes that in order to win her heart and “make her Mistress of her own Conduct” (521) he needs to “oblige her...That she should henceforth have none above her that she should need to stand in awe of; and to confirm to her that good Opinion he seemed to have, he presented her with the Key of that Gallery, to improve her Mind, and seek her Diversion among those authors he had formerly forbid her the use of” (521). Under this ruse, the Duke hopes to delude Charlot into believing he cares about her education, when in reality, he uses her greatest ambition, education, as a manipulative tool against her in order to try to win her heart for his own personal gain.

Unfortunately for the Duke, his scheme does not go according to plan for, instead of becoming more infatuated with him due to the educational freedom he has allowed her, she instead becomes withdrawn from him. Proving the Duke’s first anxious intuitions about the disastrous outcome of her education true, Charlot finds through the course of her broadened education the oppression that women have suffered under the leadership of their “trustworthy” husbands, fathers, and male leaders. Through her reading, Charlot discovers that “there were such terrible Things such as Perfidy and Inconstancy in Mankind; that even the very Favours they received, often disgusted, and that to be entirely Happy, one ought never to think of the faithless Sex” (524). Even more specifically, she becomes awakened to the Duke’s own true, shallow motives. Understanding that the Duke only allowed her an education as a way to indulge her so that he would become more favorable in her eyes for marriage, and not because he truly wishes for her education, she perceives the Duke’s plan for trapping her into another social institution – marriage.

In order to escape this new prison of oppression, Charlot decides to learn to “manage the Duke, and to distrust herself; she would no more permit of Kisses, that sweet and dangerous Commerce” (524). Newly empowered through her education, Charlot now stands on a much more equal intellectual footing with the Duke, and is able to challenge his authority in ways she was unable to before, both in the private sphere and in the public sphere. Now knowledgeable to the fact that she can use her own feminine arts of playing her emotions and reactions against his male cunning and craftiness, she is thus able to gain the upper hand in their relationship. Utilizing this new-found power, she is thus able to force the Duke, through her management of him, to “delay his Marriage to Charlot” as “by resenting, as she ought, the Abuse that had been laud upon her [she] would put an end to it” (524). Turning their power roles, and simultaneously their gender roles, upside down by applying her education to her intellectual survival and escape from marriage, Charlot essentially becomes the “male” of their relationship and is able to upstage the Duke’s control over her.

Unfortunately for Charlot, her education and empowerment comes at a price, for the Duke soon realizes the “negative” effects her education has had on her innocence of mind as well as the resulting precarious position he has placed himself in as a result of it. Comprehending that he cannot take her knowledge from her now that she has it, he decides to take his own power back by taking from her the only thing he is able to – her virginity. Her mind now “corrupted” with knowledge, this last vestige of her innocence is therefore the only thing of Charlot’s that the Duke can take for himself. As if to demonstrate his power as male for one last time over her, he therefore “prevented her” and “took advantage of her confusion” so that “Charlot was undone! thus ruined by him that ought to have been her Protector!” (525). Physically manifesting his power over the intellectual control she has gained, the Duke, in this last desperate act, reveals his insecurities and fears over Charlot’s toppling of his power. Charlot, innocent no longer in any aspect of her life, has thus matured into facing the harsh realities that confronted women in 18th century England – either live as the intellectually confined but respectable and socially-acceptable wife, or live as the intellectually expanded but disgraceful and socially-unacceptable solitary woman that no man would

take for his wife.

While these ruinous consequences may seem like a cynical critique on the education of women by Manley, though, the tale of Charlot and the Duke is actually her way of addressing and revealing the nature of what she undoubtedly considered one of the foremost social illnesses of the time period – the poor state and negative attitudes against women’s education. Desirous of exposing the dangerous belief that women’s gender allowed them to function only as wives and mothers and as the decorative adornment to complement their male counterparts, Manley shatters these perceptions through the creation of her strong feminine lead, Charlot. Through the character of Charlot, Manley not only gives women figure they can relate to, admire, and even emulate in their quest for education, but also urges them to challenge their own personal “Dukes” by fighting for their own educational empowerment. Although the road will not be without its difficulties both at home and in public, the progression of female education and its resulting empowerment and improvement of mind, body, and spirits for women, Manley argues, are improvements worth struggling for.

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