

“TO DISSOLVE THE BARBAROUS SPELL”: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF FEMALE EDUCATION IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLISH LITERATURE

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Introduction

Approximately two years before her first novel was published, Mary Hays began a regular correspondence with William Godwin, a prominent eighteenth-century writer. While Godwin had primarily intended to instruct Hays in philosophical matters through their exchanges, Hays soon began to use their letters as a platform to communicate her own ideas, most notably those concerning the state of women in English society. Hays was an unmarried woman who could not find meaningful employment to sustain herself, and she often expressed frustration about her situation in her letters to Godwin, who suggested that she might attempt writing a novel. Taking Godwin’s advice, Hays began to develop her first novel, *Memoirs of Emma Courtney*, drawing heavily on her own experiences and letters to Godwin (Luria 527). It is important to note that Hays’ reflections on her unfortunate status as an educated single woman in eighteenth-century England play a significant role in the text—her protagonist faces the same crisis as she finds herself unable to live autonomously given societal constraints for women. Like Hays, Emma often laments her circumstances and those of women in general when writing to her Godwin-like figure, Mr. Francis; she wonders why women

“suffer ourselves to be confined within a magic circle, without daring, by a magnanimous effort, to dissolve the barbarous spell?” (Hays 32) The reader understands that Hays is making this inquiry along with Emma, frustrated with the inability to live a meaningful life in the public sphere due to the expectation that women should dwell in quiet domesticity. However, throughout the eighteenth century, it can be seen that certain women authors, including Hays herself, do in fact make strides toward the dissolution of “the barbarous spell” of female confinement through the message they present regarding the educated woman, a character type known as the “learned lady,” in their works. In this thesis, I trace the progression of a radical train of thought regarding female education and the role of women that took place in the eighteenth century, which culminated in the assertion that opportunities must be available for women outside the private sphere in order to provide them with the means to exercise their intellectual capabilities and live independently.

I begin with an examination of popular thought in the eighteenth century concerning the propriety of female education. It was widely agreed that the intellect of a woman was naturally inferior to that of a man, best suiting her for a quiet and private life in the home. Since a woman’s future could only involve marriage and family life, the formal education available to men in subjects such as philosophy and the sciences

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was deemed inappropriate and unnecessary for women. Instead of engaging in these useless studies, the conduct books and other prominent writers of the time recommended that a woman be trained in the "polite social accomplishments" of dancing, music, art, and languages in order to be pleasant and agreeable hostesses in their domestic realm.

After establishing this historical framework, I transition into an analysis of my first primary text, *The Basset Table* by Susanna Centlivre, in order to demonstrate how an educated female character is presented early in the eighteenth century. The "learned lady" depicted in this 1704 play is Valeria, a dedicated scientist facing an undesirable marriage. She is ultimately married to a man who supports her scholarly pursuits, revealing Centlivre's position that an educated woman is not unmarriageable—she too can find a suitable match and fulfill the societal expectation of marriage. The character of Valeria is often reduced to a caricature of Mary Astell, who proposed a monastic school for women in her 1694 treatise *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, but I conclude that Valeria's character serves a larger purpose in the text by allowing Centlivre to comment on the compatibility of female education and marriage.

As I continue to trace the progression of this character type, I examine the character of Mrs. Selwyn, the "learned lady" presented in Frances Burney's 1778 novel *Evelina*. Evelina's temporary guardian is highly educated and uses her knowledge to attack the affectation of the male characters who antagonize Evelina; she also advocates on Evelina's behalf as Evelina attempts to reunite with her father. Although Burney does not explicitly endorse Mrs. Selwyn's conduct, which is often obnoxious and unfeminine, she is able to use her character to explore the possibilities for an educated and unmarried woman to participate in public life, suggesting that there may be options for

women outside marriage and the domestic realm.

The final work examined in this thesis is Hays' 1796 novel *Memoirs of Emma Courtney*, in which the educated yet penniless protagonist is forced to cope with the realities of life as a single woman in eighteenth-century England, namely inactivity and dependency. Emma is unable to engage in intellectually stimulating activity or reach a state of independence due to limited employment opportunities for women in the public sphere. She is driven into despair as she tries to cope with her situation through the fruitless, passionate pursuit of Augustus Harley, which leads to the text's tragic conclusion. Drawing from her own experiences, Hays makes the case that women must have the choice to become self-sufficient through the exercise of their intellects in meaningful work—marriage or destitution should not be the only options available to women.

My methodology is rooted in the idea that literature and history inform one another. I believe the literature produced during a particular time period is a highly valuable source for attaining a better understanding of crucial debates taking place at that moment in history. Additionally, it is my belief that the historical context I present in the first chapter is crucial for fully comprehending the literary texts I have chosen to assess, yet the primary sources used to compile this understanding of the time period are also worthy of careful analysis, which I have attempted to do. It is through the use of this framework that I have endeavored to trace a particular concept—possibilities for female independence as revealed by "learned ladies"—in these selected works of eighteenth-century English literature.

CHAPTER ONE Historical Context

In eighteenth-century England, opportunities for women to receive a formal education were slim. It was unusual for women across all social classes to receive an extensive education, and literacy rates among women were extremely low compared to their male peers (Steinbach 163). The near-absence of female education at this time stemmed from commonly held ideas concerning the nature of femininity and the role a woman should play in society, both of which caused education to be viewed as inappropriate for women and therefore unnecessary. It was understood that men and women were fundamentally different in multiple respects, not just their physical qualities, and that these differences manifested the proper stations for both sexes in society. According to historian Carol Strauss Sotiropoulos, “The notion that not only do biological differences determine intellectual and moral differences, but that these differences are complementary opposites suiting men and women for different social spheres, became scientifically theorized as ‘sexual complementarity’” (19). The theory of sexual complementarity shaped the societal norms of the time, which dictated that only men belonged in public life, while women were best suited for a life of domesticity simply because of their sex. This notion was founded in part on the belief that men possessed a superior intellect as part of their natural masculinity; therefore, “femininity and learning became widely perceived as two incompatible domains, and writers who denounced the learned woman took their cue from biological authority” (Sotiropoulos 22). According to opponents of female education, an educated woman was acting against the role assigned to her by nature, and her pursuit of learning was “unsuited, or even injurious, to her particularly female virtues” (Sotiropoulos 13). Education

would corrupt the inherent nature of women and threaten the sexual complementarity that existed at the core of society.

Arguments concerning the natural intellectual inferiority of women and the impropriety of formal female education are visible in many of the texts written on gender from the time period. In Thomas Gisborne’s *An Enquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex*, he asserts that God himself prescribed inherent gender roles: “He has adopted... with the most conspicuous wisdom, a corresponding plan of discrimination between the mental powers and dispositions of the two sexes” (20-21). In accordance with the conceptions of gender circulating at the time, Gisborne affirms the idea that the stations of men and women in their respective spheres are ordained by God, not crafted by society, and that women are best suited for lives in the home instead of the public domain because of their lesser level of intelligence. Gisborne does acknowledge that some women may have an elevated understanding, but dismisses these situations as “variations from the general course of things” (32). Generally, men are the sex with superior intellect, and since the natural state of affairs was designated by God, there should be no efforts to upset this natural balance. As Gisborne argues, “An attempt to efface the discriminating features which the hand of God has impressed on the mind, is in every case impossible to accomplish; and would be in every case...the height of folly and presumption” (39). The female sex as a whole cannot overcome their naturally prescribed level of intelligence, according to Gisborne, and it would be foolish and fruitless for them to strive beyond their capabilities.

In his *Sermons to Young Women*, James Fordyce presents similar sentiments about the proper station of woman and her inferior intellect. Fordyce views women as inferior to men in most areas: “I scruple not to declare my opinion, that Nature appears

to have formed the faculties of your sex for the most part with less vigour than those of ours" (137). He especially believes this to be the case regarding female intellect—Fordyce lists the "difficult" areas of study pursued by men, such as war, politics, and the sciences and claims that "those masculine women, that would plead for your sharing any part of this province equally with us, do not understand your true interests" (137). Contrary to the arguments of "masculine" learned ladies, it is not beneficial for women to pursue these subjects because their full potential can only be realized within their naturally designated sphere of domestic life. According to Fordyce, "There is an influence, there is an empire which belongs to you...I mean that which has the heart for its object, and is secured by meekness and modesty, by soft attraction and virtuous love" (137-138). Women succeed in this "empire" since they are naturally suited for matters of the heart rather than the mind. Fordyce believes women have the duty to benefit men by "ruling" over the domestic sphere through use of their female virtues: "Your business is chiefly to read Men, in order to make yourselves agreeable and useful" (138). The naturally superior sex needs the assistance of docile women in order to find success in the public sphere, so Fordyce encourages women to strive toward enhancing their female virtues rather than attempting to abandon them altogether in the pursuit of a masculine education.

In response to this dominant line of thinking in eighteenth-century England, feminist writers spoke out against the idea of naturally prescribed characteristics and roles that placed women in a subservient position, arguing that women could be just as intelligent and capable of learning as men. In her *Letters on Education*, Catherine Macaulay proposes that the distinct characteristics of men and women are not natural but fabricated by society. According to Macau-

lay, girls and boys begin life with the same natural curiosity and desire to learn, but:

If, before her natural vivacity is entirely subdued by habit, little Miss is inclined to show her locomotive tricks in a manner not entirely agreeable to the trammels of custom, she is reproved with a sharpness which gives her a consciousness of having highly transgressed the laws of decorum; and what with the vigilance of those who are appointed to superintend her conduct, and the false bias they have imposed upon her mind, every vigorous exertion is suppressed, the mind and body yield to the tyranny of error, and Nature is charged with all those imperfections which we alone owe to the blunders of art. (47)

In Macaulay's interpretation of gender roles, God does not dictate the proper station of a woman by granting her certain qualities, including limited intellectual abilities, to ensure she remains in this position. Women are born with inherent "vivacity" of mind, but society slowly extinguishes this characteristic and molds them into weak and unintelligent beings through its exacting standards regarding appropriate female behavior. Macaulay notes that while nature is often credited as the author of these societal norms, it is actually men who have established and perpetuated these false notions through use of physical strength, their one natural advantage: "Certain it is, that some degree of inferiority, in point of corporeal strength, seems always to have existed between the two sexes; and this advantage, in the barbarous ages of mankind, was abused to such a degree, as to destroy all the natural rights of the female species, and reduce them to a fate of abject slavery" (206). According to Macaulay, men have historically used their superior physical strength to confine women to a specific

societal purpose, which contributed to the suppression of female intellect and the limitation of opportunities for a woman to discover her capacity for knowledge.

It was agreed that women did need training of some sort early in life in order to prepare them for adulthood; however, their education varied drastically from that received by young men. While boys were thoroughly educated in academic disciplines, “girls’ training, especially before 1850, usually emphasized polite social accomplishments rather than academic or practical ones” (Steinbach 164). This minimal education in areas such as music, dancing, art, and languages would give them sufficient preparation for their lives in the domestic sphere—obtaining deeper knowledge, it was said, would hardly be useful for their station as wives and mothers. Learning of this sort could take place in a school outside of the home, but “many wealthier middle-class families did not send their daughters to school at all, as the family home was considered a more sheltered environment than even the most carefully chosen school” (Steinbach 164). Regardless of whether this education took place in the home or at school, there was a general absence of serious academic study provided to young women.

This limited female education was not considered problematic by those who believed women were naturally inferior to men in terms of intellect. According to Gisborne, women could not be expected to study the same subjects as men because “these and other studies...demand the efforts of a mind endowed with the powers of close and comprehensive reasoning” (21). Since women are naturally deficient in reason, attempts to educate them in serious subjects would be fruitless. He did, however, believe girls should be educated as much as their limited capacity for knowledge would allow: “Both in schools and in private families there prevails a desire to call forth the

reasoning power of girls into action, and to enrich the mind with useful and interesting knowledge suitable to their sex” (Gisborne 58). Girls should have an education of some sort so they might appropriately employ their limited capacity for reason, but the information covered in their studies should appropriately correspond with their natural station. Fordyce echoes and expands upon Gisborne’s sentiments by describing the positive effects of “practical” education for women: “I must not forget to subjoin how much the Mental Improvements, now enforced, will contribute to adorn and animate the companion, to direct and dignify the mistress, to accomplish the mother and the friend, to spread a charm over the whole matrimonial state, and to relieve those duller hours that are apt to steal on the most delightful condition of humanity” (17). Having some sort of vague knowledge, especially in the areas of “polite social accomplishments” is acceptable for a woman—it assists her in the domestic realm, alleviates some of the monotony associated with these duties, and allows her to be a pleasant wife and mother. However, she should not attempt to understand the masculine subjects beyond her reach, and the education she receives should not lead her to desire a life beyond the expected role of domesticity.

Feminist writers at the time found this proposed model of education to be deficient and have the potential to cause more harm than good for those it claimed to “educate.” In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Mary Wollstonecraft points to this view of female education as a serious problem: “In this error men have, probably, been led by viewing education in a false light; not considering it as the first step to form a being advancing gradually towards perfection; but only as a preparation for life” (53). Since Gisborne and Fordyce anticipate that women will spend their lives in the home, they reason that she only needs knowledge that will prove useful within the

domestic sphere. They do not consider that a woman may want to pursue learning as a means of self-betterment, which Wollstonecraft views as the central purpose of education. It is because female education is seen merely in terms of its ability to prepare women for their domestic role that women were often stereotyped as weak and foolish: "The grand source of female folly and vice has ever appeared to me to arise from narrowness of mind; and the very constitution of civil governments has put almost insuperable obstacles in the way to prevent the cultivation of female understanding—yet virtue can be built on no other foundation" (Wollstonecraft 54). Like Macaulay, Wollstonecraft refuses to acknowledge that women are naturally lesser beings than men or best suited for a specific sphere. Rather, men have forced women into these roles, and society has suffered as a result because women are lacking in the virtue that can only come about as the result of receiving an education. Additionally, the female education Wollstonecraft observes around her degrades women in that it instructs them "that it is only through their address to excite emotions in men...besides, the books professedly written for their instruction, which make the first impression on their minds, all inculcate the same opinions" (120). Women are taught to view themselves as being at the disposal of men from the very beginning of their education, so they are unable to fathom the pursuit of personal interests. Since women are taught to think of men before themselves, according to Wollstonecraft, "the whole tenour of female education (the education of society) tends to render the best disposed romantic and inconstant; and the remainder vain and mean" (75). It only produces negative effects on the women it seeks to prepare for domestic life, and society suffers as a result. Macaulay concurs with Wollstonecraft on the origin of female weakness and vice: "These I firmly believe to originate in situation and education only"

(206). Women are not naturally feeble-minded; rather, the station in which they are placed by patriarchal norms and the education that perpetuates this system of gender roles have both contributed to this crisis.

However, despite the trend of women receiving an insufficient education, some women did manage to access the same knowledge as their male peers. These women were known as "learned ladies" and were generally met with criticism stemming from their supposed propensity to flaunt their knowledge while abandoning traditionally feminine characteristics. Fordyce offers a detailed description of this figure in his sermons:

But perhaps my little friend is afraid, lest the men should suspect her of being what the world style in derision a Learned Lady...A woman that affects to dispute, to decide, to dictate on every subject; that watches or makes opportunities of throwing out scraps of literature, or shreds of philosophy, in every company; that engrosses the conversation as if she alone were qualified to entertain; that betrays, in short, a boundless intemperance of tongue, together with an inextinguishable passion for shining by the splendor of her own talents; such a woman is truly insufferable. (151)

Because it was assumed that women who were educated would behave in this inappropriate manner, conduct books from the time period made sure to dissuade women from becoming a lady of this reputation. According to John Gregory's *A Father's Legacy to His Daughters*, "If you happen to have any learning, keep it a profound secret, especially from the men, who generally look with a jealous and malignant eye on a woman of great parts, and a cultivated understanding" (19). If a woman were to stumble

upon knowledge, she should not publicly exhibit her learning because this would have the potential to upset the men around her, especially if she were to appear superior to them in intellect. Fordyce echoes the male desire for female knowledge to remain private: "I mentioned the exercise of reciting verses. With relation to this, I would only say, that I do not wish a young woman to indulge it in any company, that is not very private and chosen indeed" (149). Even Sydney Smith, an advocate for female education, warned against public displays of such learning: "Nor does it follow that a woman is to become an author, merely because she has talent enough for it. We do not wish a lady to write books...The great use of her knowledge will be that it contributes to her private happiness" (5). Even women who happened to be educated were expected to remain docile creatures within the domestic sphere; it was considered a grave violation of conduct for them to join serious intellectual conversations, particularly in a public setting.

Because "learned ladies" were considered problematic and a threat to established gender roles, they were often attacked in the literature of the time period. In his "To a Lady: Of the Characters of Women," Alexander Pope satirizes what he deems to be the faults of womankind, particularly their vanity and pride, pointing to education as one of the primary causes of these flaws. He uses the character of Rufa to demonstrate the absurdity of female education: "Agrees as ill with Rufa studying Locke, / As Sappho's diamonds with her dirty smock" (Pope 23-24). Just as beautiful gems are not typically worn with disgusting clothing, so women in their naturally inferior nature should not adorn themselves with knowledge of valuable political philosophy. According to Pope, a woman who obtains an education in the traditionally male subjects is unnatural and out of place; it hardly makes sense for her to pursue these subjects

given her naturally established role in society. Female education, therefore, is ludicrous, especially given the effect it has on these "learned ladies." The character of Atossa furthers Pope's critique of learned ladies, serving as an example of a woman, corrupted by education, who takes pleasure in attacking the men around her: "Finds all her life one warfare upon earth: / Shines, in exposing knaves, and painting fools" (Pope 118-119). In Pope's view, women who receive an education are prideful and therefore overcome with the desire to aggressively share their knowledge, so they often use their learning as a tool to establish superiority over the men around them. In doing so, they are perceived by Pope as being employed in a constant battle against men with the goal of making them appear foolish. Atossa is so consumed by this pursuit that she feels she must always be the victor: "Superiors? death! and equals? what a curse!" (Pope 135). Atossa reveals Pope's fear, shared with many men of the time period, that educated women would turn to unfeminine behavior as a result of their education, abandoning the social expectations of their gender and engaging in violent verbal attacks against the men around them in order to feel superior. This behavior, unbecoming of a wife and mother, would lead to the abandoning of domestic responsibility and pose a serious threat to the sexual complementarity at the core of society.

Although the "learned lady" was primarily an eighteenth-century convention, Lord Byron includes a critique of educated women in Canto I of his poem *Don Juan*, written in 1818. Byron explicitly characterizes Donna Inez, Don Juan's mother, as a "learned lady" and describes in detail the knowledge she has acquired, especially in the traditionally masculine subjects. However, Byron does not approve of Donna Inez's education, sharing Pope's view that her intellect has produced the fatal flaw of pride: "To others' share let 'female errors

fall', / For she had not even one—the worst of all" (Byron I.16. 127-128). Donna Inez's certainty in her perfection leads her to participate in the same "warfare" as Atossa, particularly with her husband. Byron suggests that this propensity for violent exhibitions of superiority will ultimately cause romantic relationships to fail:

'Tis pity learned virgins ever wed
With persons of no sort of education,
Or gentlemen, who, though well-
born and -bred,
Grow tired of scientific conversation;
I don't choose to say much upon this
head,
I'm a plain man, and in a single
station,
But—Oh! ye lords of ladies
intellectual,
Inform us truly, have they not hen-
peck'd you all? (I.22.169-176)

Byron assumes the traditional stance that the proper station for a woman is marriage but argues that she cannot expect to be a good wife if she has received an education. Because of the female tendency to flaunt any sort of learning, men will view these "learned ladies" as tiresome, causing insurmountable conflicts between husband and wife. In the case of Donna Inez and her husband, Don José, the latter is a generally unsavory character and engages in extramarital affairs. However, by casting the learned Donna Inez in this light, Byron asks the audience to excuse Don José's behavior. While Don José is not to be commended for his infidelity, Donna Inez's education and resulting pride is identified as its cause; therefore, it is really Donna Inez who is to blame for her husband's misconduct—it is the unfeminine traits brought about by her education that threaten their domestic tranquility.

Given the stereotype of the "learned lady" and the perpetuation of this character

type in works of eighteenth-century literature and beyond, feminist proponents of female education felt required to distance themselves from such women and classify them as the rare exception rather than the rule. They abhorred the flimsy education available to women at the time; however, they still valued certain ideals of proper behavior and did not want women to appear obnoxious and conceited as a result of having knowledge, which would confirm the arguments of those who opposed their having access to a formal education. To solve this dilemma, "Eighteenth-century feminists invoked a closet Learned Lady dedicated to individual intellectual development and a public Proper Lady who effaced knowledge and talent in accommodating herself to the prevailing theology of femininity and domesticity" (Sotiropoulos 126). The ideal intellectual woman for these feminists became someone who sought knowledge for the purpose of self-betterment but would not flaunt her gifts through inappropriate displays of this learning. Wollstonecraft subscribed to these ideas about educated women: "I know that the behavior of a few women, who by accident, or following a strong bent of nature, have acquired a portion of knowledge superior to the rest of their sex, has often been overbearing, but there have been instances of women who, attaining knowledge, have not discarded modesty" (182). She assures her readers that women will not automatically abandon all standards of propriety just because they receive a better education—while is certainly possible for an educated woman to become a pompous "learned lady," other women have managed to maintain their manners even with the possession of extensive knowledge. Smith also grapples with this issue, acknowledging that "it is said, that the effect of knowledge is to make women pedantic and affected; and that nothing can be more offensive, than to see a woman stepping out of the natural modesty

of her sex, to make an ostentatious display of her literary attainments” (2). While Wollstonecraft dismisses the notion that all women will flaunt their knowledge and behave inappropriately, Smith presents this fear as a valid concern, identifying it as one of the main reasons why men oppose female education. However, he proposes a solution to combat this potential problem: “Diffuse knowledge generally among women and you will at once cure the conceit which knowledge occasions while it is rare” (Smith 2). Speaking for his sex, he claims that men will accept female education if women remain humble about the knowledge they obtain: “Among men of sense and liberal politeness, a woman who has successfully cultivated her mind, without diminishing the gentleness and propriety of her manners, is always sure to meet with a respect and attention bordering upon enthusiasm” (Smith 4). Both Wollstonecraft and Smith express the idea that women can achieve a balance between learnedness and virtue, thus dismissing a major piece of the argument against female education as well as the stereotype perpetuated by popular literature.

In eighteenth-century England, the lack of proper female education was justified by the claim that women were intellectually inferior by nature and therefore best suited for a docile life in the domestic sphere. The knowledge women received through their education was based upon what would be proper and useful for them to fulfill their natural roles in the home. A select few women were able to receive a more formal education in the masculine subjects, but they were often accused of being obnoxious and prideful about their learning, casting aside the docility expected of them and taking on assertive and masculine personality traits. The female characters assessed in this thesis can be said to fit this mold of the “learned lady,” but, unlike Pope and Byron, the authors of these texts do not attack their educated female charac-

ters. Rather, the character type of the “learned lady” is used to reveal a position regarding female education and the role of women in general that calls into question the commonly accepted notions regarding female inferiority and a woman’s presumed place in society.

CHAPTER TWO

The Basset Table

Susanna Centlivre’s 1704 play *The Basset Table* does not explicitly focus on the issue of female education, as it is primarily a commentary on the vice of gaming as exhibited by the play’s protagonist, Lady Reveler. However, Centlivre finds a way to include her thoughts on education for women through the character of Lady Reveller’s cousin, Valeria. This particular “learned lady” is young, completely engrossed in her scientific studies, and beloved by Ensign Lovely, a man who does not stand in the way of these endeavors. Her father, Sir Richard, attempts to marry her off to a crude sea captain who does not share Valeria’s level of intellect, but he is ultimately unsuccessful, and Valeria is instead married to Lovely. At one point in the text, Valeria expresses an interest in founding a school for women that would allow them to pursue serious studies; this is often said to be an allusion to Mary Astell’s 1694 treatise *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, in which she advocates a similar institution. It has been argued that Centlivre includes this reference and the character of Valeria in general as a mockery of Astell and her vision for women—in the introduction to *A Serious Proposal*, Patricia Springborg maintains that Astell was widely criticized and “even the stage did not spare her. Susanna Centlivre...has Valeria, ‘that little She-Philosopher,’ doubtless modelled on Astell” (15). In Springborg’s view, Valeria is a caricature of Astell and her hopes for female education, which would suggest that Centlivre is skeptical of

Astell's optimism in a woman's capacity for such serious study or even its necessity. However, though the language used to describe Valeria's ideal form of education for women parallels Astell's "proposal," closer analysis reveals that Centlivre's female scientist cannot be considered a satirical attack on Astell—Centlivre actually agrees with Astell that education is the cure for frivolity in women and provides her own arguments concerning the place of female education in society. Through the character of Valeria in *The Basset Table*, Centlivre dispels the notion that the "learned lady" is a threat to domestic life. While Valeria's violations of decorum are for comic effect and not to be replicated, she is ultimately able to find love in the form of a man who supports her academic endeavors, revealing Centlivre's belief in the compatibility of educated women and the expectation of marriage.

The model of female education presented by Astell and supported by Valeria involves the belief that women are not naturally inferior to men. Because it is not a woman's biology that subjugates her, Astell claims, like Wollstonecraft and Macaulay, that female inferiority must have another cause, one that is preventable. She concludes that it is the frivolity encouraged in women that leads to their intellectual inferiority and identifies two main factors contributing to this: education and custom. Astell first discusses the effects of an insufficient education: "The Cause therefore of the defects we labour under, is, if not wholly, yet at least in the first place, to be ascribed to the mistakes of our Education, which like an Error in the first Concoction, spreads its ill Influence through all our Lives" (59-60). Here, Astell claims that education sets the course of an individual's life; therefore, the state of female education must be dismal if a pattern of frivolity is found among women. Instructed only in the "polite social accomplishments," women are not taught to value other kinds of serious knowledge and instead be-

come consumed by pastimes that encourage frivolous behavior. While education lays a poor foundation for women, custom allows the cycle to perpetuate. According to Astell, "Custom, that merciless torrent that carries all before...For 'tis but Decorous that she who is not capable of giving better Rules, shou'd follow those she sees before her" (67). Since women are only presented with one way in which to express their femininity, they are limited to the path set before them, and by conforming to societal customs, they are unable to develop the independent thought that would allow them to break free of the cycle. Together, education and custom cause the situation of women to be perpetuated, creating a seemingly grim outlook for their future.

However, Astell proposes a solution to this problematic situation: "Now as to the Proposal it is to erect a *Monastery*...and such as shall have a double aspect, being not only a Retreat from the World for those who desire that advantage, but likewise, an institution and previous discipline, to fit us to do the greatest good in it" (73). By allowing women to step away from a world that dictates their behavior through custom, the "monastery" would allow them to act based upon their own natural capabilities, not the mandates of society. A school of this kind would have the ability to act both reactively and proactively, erasing the flaws already established in women and preventing their corrupting influence in the future. In order for the school to be successful, Astell claims that women must receive a serious education: "Therefore, one great end of this institution, shall be to expel that cloud of Ignorance, which Custom has involv'd us in, to furnish our minds with a stock of solid and useful Knowledge, that the Souls of Women may no longer be the only unadorn'd and neglected things" (77). Custom preserves the insufficient female education system, but in an institution set apart from the ways of the world, women would have the ability to

pursue practical and meaningful knowledge for the purpose of dispelling frivolity, cultivating virtue, and enriching the soul. Once this has been accomplished, women can carry their understanding back into the world “to render them more agreeable and useful in company, and to furnish them with becoming entertainments when alone” (Astell 80). This new class of “agreeable and useful” women will be a benefit to society by exemplifying the virtue that can result from a proper education and serving as a new model of appropriate female behavior. The follies of women will no longer be encouraged or perpetuated with the presence of an ideal woman who is serious, knowledgeable, and virtuous.

Because Centlivre alludes to this form of education as proposed by Astell, it must be determined how she views female education as a whole in order to find whether her view aligns with Astell’s. According to critic Karl Heinz Göller, Centlivre’s position can be seen through her characterization of Valeria: “Valeria is the very picture of a feminist, and yet her creator, Mrs. Centlivre, views her with a critical eye and amused detachment” (92). Göller’s interpretation is similar to Springborg’s in that Valeria is simply a comic figure whose views are not meant to be taken seriously. Additionally, Göller argues that Centlivre values romance over the pursuit of learning for women: “As progressive as Mrs. Centlivre may be, she holds fast to the idea that no matter how learned the woman, love will triumph over science in the end” (92). Critic Patsy S. Fowler, however, sees Valeria as a reflection of Centlivre’s own beliefs about female education. She acknowledges the comedic nature of Valeria’s character but argues that “Centlivre invariably is making a more serious point concerning the education and intellectual abilities of women” (Fowler 28). Because Centlivre is in fact arguing in favor of female education, “What the foolish Lady Reveller offers facetiously, Centlivre, like

Mary Astell in *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, ironically intends to be considered as a possibility” (Fowler 29). While Centlivre may not be actively advocating for a female “monastery” in the same manner as Astell, she supports Astell’s proposition that women should receive a serious education as a cure for their frivolity. Additionally, Fowler interprets Valeria as an innovative woman who is able to find a balance between love and academic pursuits: “There is, however, no insistence that Valeria give up science in order to find love. In fact, Centlivre allows her to have passion for both her husband and her philosophy, thus insisting that women can achieve both” (29). In my own reading of *The Basset Table*, I find a third meaning, similar to Fowler’s, behind Valeria’s character that reveals Centlivre’s views about female education. Valeria’s fascination with natural science and dissections is decidedly unfeminine, which demonstrates Centlivre’s view that such an obsession robs women of their natural graces and is therefore inappropriate. However, Centlivre does not completely dismiss female education; rather, she seems to value learning over the frivolous values espoused by Lady Reveller. Additionally, Valeria’s love of learning allows her to escape from her father’s oppressive will for her future and disapproval of her education. She is able to marry a man who supports her in her academic endeavors instead, which reveals Centlivre’s position that educated women can thrive within the context of a supportive marriage.

Valeria’s introduction in the play immediately sparks a debate on whether education is suitable for women, particularly learning grounded in the natural sciences. She enters chasing a fly for dissection and is chastised by her cousin, Lady Reveller, who refers to her studies as “whimsies.” Alpiew, Lady Reveller’s servant, agrees with the frivolity of Valeria’s academic pursuits on the basis of gender: “Ridiculous, indeed, for

Women; Philosophy suits our Sex, as Jack Boots would do" (Centlivre 65). According to Alpiew, femininity and science are incompatible, and she presents a comic image of a woman wearing masculine boots to emphasize Valeria's seemingly ludicrous behavior. However, Valeria is ready to combat Alpiew's assertions: "Custom would bring them as much in fashion as Furbeloes, and Practice would make us as Valiant as e're a Hero of them all; the Resolution is in the Mind,—Nothing can enslave that" (Centlivre 65). Valeria's language here parallels Astell's hypothesis that custom is heavily to blame for the failures of women; like Astell, Valeria believes that custom must be changed in order to allow women to explore the natural freedom of their minds. Additionally, Valeria expresses the opinion that men and women have the same capacity for intellectual thought if their minds are cultivated properly. A change in custom would encourage women to become "valiant," a quality typically viewed as masculine, which would allow them to bring their free, independent thought to action. Astell shares this optimism for the female capacity to learn: "I know not how the Men will resent it, to have their enclosure broken down, and Women invited to tast of that Tree of Knowledge they have so long unjustly *monopoliz'd*. But they must excuse me, if I be as partial to my own Sex as they are to theirs, and think Women as capable of Learning as Men are, and that it becomes them as well" (83). In this particular exchange, it seems that Centlivre is on Valeria's side, thereby agreeing with Astell that women can achieve the same level of intellect as men. Valeria's argument is idealistic but convincing, while Alpiew is left looking foolish for maintaining an opinion that relies solely on customs revealed to be arbitrary. According to Centlivre, customs can be changed, while the natural freedom of the female mind is an enduring principle that is capable of being accessed through proper education.

While Centlivre agrees with Valeria's view concerning the intellectual equality of men and women, she does not necessarily endorse Valeria's expression of her intelligence. An example of Centlivre's hesitance to commend Valeria's behavior occurs when she is discussing dissection with her cousin, Lady Reveller. When Lady Reveller is horrified that Valeria has chosen to cut up her pet dove in search of scientific answers, Valeria responds by arguing, "Can Animals, Insects or Reptils, be put to a Noble use, than to improve our Knowledge? Cousin, I'll give you this Jewel for your *Italian Grey-hound*" (Centlivre 66). Lady Reveller is shocked and disgusted by this proposition, a reaction the audience is meant to share. A beloved pet is not a creature to be sacrificed to science, which Valeria cannot comprehend. When Lady Reveller comments exasperatedly that Valeria will "prove by and by out of *Descartes*, that we are all Machines," the audience also is inclined to agree with this assessment (Centlivre 67). At this point in the play, Valeria is made to seem more masculine than feminine. She does not maintain the feminine, gentle spirit that would allow her to bond with an animal and views them only in terms of their usefulness, casting Valeria in an almost "mechanical" light. Especially when compared with Lady Reveller's emotional reaction to Valeria's statements, it seems that Centlivre is upholding Lady Reveller as the feminine ideal. It is shocking for the audience to consider that a woman would behave coarsely and without genuine feeling toward living creatures—women nearly always have the tendency to be nurturing, which Valeria clearly lacks. The audience is left unsettled by Valeria's vulgar commentary here and is inclined to side with Lady Reveller's disappointment in Valeria's inability to express traditional female qualities as a result of her obsession with science.

Centlivre considers gentleness towards creation as exhibited in Lady Reveller's cha-

racter to be an essential part of femininity, but she does not necessarily share the attitude towards education that Lady Reveller presents. It is Lady Reveller who initially introduces the Astell-like idea of a school for women: “Well, Cousin, might I Advise, you should bestow your Fortune in Founding a College for the Study of Philosophy, where none but Women should be admitted” (Centlivre 66). She laughs after making this suggestion, mocking the idea that women should attend such an institution. However, Valeria’s sober response seems to carry more weight than Lady Reveller’s teasing: “What you make a Jest of, I’d Execute, were Fortune in my Power” (Centlivre 66). This response is not meant to elicit laughter from the audience; rather, it shows Valeria’s admirable dedication to female education, even in the midst of her cousin’s mockery. The juxtaposition between Valeria and Lady Reveller can be seen further as Lady Reveller continues to dismiss Valeria’s excitement about her learning: when Valeria tries to share her scientific findings concerning the gallbladder with her cousin, she facetiously replies, “I am satisfy’d I have one, when I lose at Play, or see a Lady Address when I am by, and ’tis equal to me whether the rest of Creation have or not” (Centlivre 66). Here, “gall” takes on two different meanings. While Valeria means the organ of the body, Lady Reveller pretends to misunderstand her and responds using “gall” to mean bitterness, thus displaying some of the vices of women that Astell seeks to correct in her institution, including meaningless amusements, an obsession with the opinion of men, and ignorance. Valeria, on the other hand, is serious about her intellectual growth and continues to strive to improve her knowledge. Through the comparison of Valeria and Lady Reveller, it can be determined that Centlivre prefers Valeria’s genuine interest in the subject and the desire to increase her knowledge over Lady Reveller’s foolishness and frivolity, thus concurring with Astell’s

assertion that the ideal woman should be serious and knowledgeable.

Centlivre also reveals her support of Valeria by incorporating a love interest with whom she is compatible despite her superior intellect. When the audience is first introduced to Ensign Lovely, he is lovingly watching Valeria examine her collection of organisms, showing genuine interest in her field of study. As he observes, Lovely exclaims: “Prodigious! ’tis the Joint-Worm, which the Learned talk of so much” (Centlivre 77). Here, Lovely seems to distance himself from the “learned” while placing Valeria in this category. He is able to show an appreciation for the sciences without exhibiting the “jealous and malignant eye” that men were assumed to possess toward educated women (Gregory 19). In fact, Lovely is infatuated with Valeria primarily because of her intellectual superiority: “Oh you Charm me with these Discoveries” (Centlivre 78). Although an actor’s performance choice could give this line irony, it is more likely that Centlivre intends for Lovely’s language to express that educated women are not “spoil’d” in the eyes of all men as Lady Reveller claims (Centlivre 65). They are just as capable of finding love because men have the ability to look past and even embrace the learning of their partner. However, Lovely does find one fault with Valeria, claiming, “You have not Love enough; that Fire would Consume and Banish all Studies but its own” (Centlivre 78). Lovely is disappointed in Valeria’s lack of passionate expression regarding their romance. He courts her with beautiful, flowery language, but she responds matter-of-factly: “Have I not told you Twenty Times I Love you,—for I hate Disguise; your Temper being Adapted to mine, gave my Soul the First Impression” (Centlivre 78). Valeria does not see the merit in the continual use of romantic language or professions of love when their mutual love is well understood. She does express that she

fell in love with Lovely at first sight but indicates that this attraction was due to the compatibility of their tempers, not because of idealistic or romantic reasons. However, Valeria's language changes when she is nearly forced to marry Captain Hearty, showing her ability to articulate her feelings about Lovely despite her level of intellect and typically rational thought.

Valeria seeks intellectual companionship in a partner, one who appreciates and supports her academic endeavors, and it is only when this is nearly snatched from her that she begins to express her love passionately. When it appears that her father has every intent of compelling her to marry Captain Hearty, she exclaims: "Can I have Joy in a Species so very different from my own? Oh my Dear *Lovely!*—We were only form'd one for another" (Centlivre 95). This language drastically differs from the terms Valeria initially uses to describe her relationship with Lovely. As she faces the prospect of losing Lovely forever, Valeria claims that she loves him not simply because of a compatibility of temperaments but because they are of the same "species," signifying that what makes them alike is an appreciation of the intellect. To most men, including Captain Hearty, Valeria is simply a woman and nothing more, while Lovely sees and values Valeria as an intellectual individual. Marrying Lovely would be the only way for Valeria to preserve her identity as a scientist—it can be assumed that Captain Hearty would force Valeria to discontinue her studies so she could become solely devoted to the bearing and raising of children, while Lovely would continue to encourage Valeria in her scientific pursuits within their home as his wife. However, through a marriage plot in which Lovely secretly replaces Captain Hearty, Valeria is saved from a marriage of this sort and, consequently, is provided with the ideal situation in which she is able to engage in her studies while married to the man she loves. It is here

that Valeria seems to deviate the furthest from Astell's vision for women. When discussing marriage, Astell argues that "modesty requiring that a Woman should not love before Marriage, but only make choice of one whom she can love hereafter: She who has none but innocent affections, being easily able to fix them where Duty requires" (102). According to Astell, women should not succumb to the passions of love; rather, they should use reason alone to determine who they should marry. While Valeria points to rational considerations as the reason for her affection for Lovely, it becomes clear that she truly does love him in the romantic sense before they are married. Astell disdains romance and values practicality and reason in women, but Centlivre champions romantic love through Valeria's character by showing that it can be compatible with learning if a woman falls in love with a man who embraces her intellect and supports her in any academic endeavors.

The character of Valeria in *The Basset Table* has often been reduced to a mockery of Mary Astell's vision for female education in *A Serious Proposal of the Ladies*. However, Centlivre uses Valeria to provide a more complex view of education for women and "learned ladies" in particular. While Valeria's fascination with dissections is considered to be unfeminine and crude, Centlivre supports the knowledge and virtue that stem from a proper education. Additionally, Centlivre provides Valeria with a love interest who appears to have fallen in love with her because of her superior intellect, which proves that Centlivre believes learning is compatible with married life if a woman is able to choose a spouse who embraces this aspect of her character. Overall, Centlivre does not actively advocate for Astell's model of female education, but she presents a "learned lady" who, despite her idiosyncrasies, allows Centlivre to express her approval of serious studies for women.

CHAPTER THREE

Evelina

Frances Burney's 1778 novel *Evelina* follows the story of Evelina Anville, a young woman sheltered from the ways of the world by her guardian, the over-protective Mr. Villars. When Mr. Villars is reluctantly persuaded to send her to stay with family friends, Evelina is plunged into society, interacting with both kind and despicable characters as she is educated by her experiences and finally finds love in the form of the chivalrous Lord Orville. One of the most notable women Evelina encounters is Mrs. Selwyn, a "learned lady" and Evelina's temporary guardian while at Bristol Hotwells. Evelina often describes Mrs. Selwyn's behavior in a negative light by giving her correspondents detailed accounts of Mrs. Selwyn's lack of graces, particularly her tendency to display her knowledge inappropriately. These illustrations of Mrs. Selwyn might lead one to conclude that Burney maintains a disapproving view of this character; however, though Burney makes a correlation between Mrs. Selwyn's education and her prideful, outspoken nature, it is because of these typically negative qualities that she is able to serve as both an agent of satire and Evelina's advocate. Burney reveals her approbation of "learned ladies" through Mrs. Selwyn's active role in the text, offering an alternative way of life for women who are unmarried and therefore free of domestic concerns.

In his article "The Two Mrs. Selwyns: *Evelina* and *Man of the World*," Gerard Barker argues: "Miss Burney does not condemn Mrs. Selwyn's cleverness, she merely regrets that her pursuit of learning has soured her personality and robbed her of her feminine graces" (83). Burney certainly does not subscribe to traditional literary conventions regarding gender roles, according to Barker, as she uses Lord Merton's sexism as a means for satire, yet she indi-

cates a connection between Mrs. Selwyn's education and her less savory character traits. Barker also notes that Mrs. Selwyn always seems to have the last word, which reveals Burney's favor of Mrs. Selwyn despite her flaws; additionally, this demonstrates that the men are intellectually incapable of answering her witticisms. Critic John Richetti takes another view of Mrs. Selwyn in his piece, "Voice and Gender in Eighteenth-Century Fiction: Haywood to Burney," acknowledging Mrs. Selwyn's intellect but arguing that her "violation of female decorum makes her in the end a comic figure and secondary player, lumped with other sorts of female marginality represented by Lady Louisa and Mrs. Beaumont" (271). Barker's interpretative stance that Burney maintains an air of regret for Mrs. Selwyn's rough personality is convincing, as Evelina often criticizes her guardian, and Mrs. Selwyn is nearly universally hated by those who know her because of her bluntness and blatant disregard for social norms. Richetti's interpretation, however, requires that the reader completely dismiss Mrs. Selwyn's importance in the text. Mrs. Selwyn is not simply a comic figure—she serves as an agent of satire who uncovers the comical flaws in others. Additionally, Mrs. Selwyn cannot be categorized as a secondary character who belongs in the same category as Lady Louisa and Mrs. Beaumont. While the former two characters maintain traditional standards of femininity, Mrs. Selwyn stands alone as a woman who deviates drastically from society's expectations for her sex through her education and expression of her learning. She also plays a much larger role in the text than either Lady Louisa or Mrs. Beaumont, especially in view of her role as a satirist throughout the novel.

One of Mrs. Selwyn's major scenes as an agent of satire occurs during the bet among the gentlemen, in which Mrs. Selwyn exposes their lack of education while flaunting her own. When Lord Orville asks for

Mrs. Selwyn's opinion of how the men should settle their bet, she replies, "Since the gentlemen are not allowed to risk their *necks*, suppose we decide the bet by their *heads*?" (Burney 239) She then proceeds to explain that in her mind, the best way to resolve the bet would be a contest to determine which of the gentlemen has the ability to recite more of Horace's poetry. The gentlemen are immediately flummoxed by this proposition, which does not escape Mrs. Selwyn's notice; she taunts them by asking, "I am sure you cannot be afraid of a weak woman?" (Burney 239). After seeing that neither Lord Merton nor Mr. Coverly plan to participate despite her provocation, she springs upon the nearby Mr. Lovel, coercing him to admit that he is lacking in knowledge of the classics. Through Mrs. Selwyn, Burney is able to satirize the three gentlemen in two major ways. First, she exposes their ignorance, especially in terms of the classics. Given societal norms, the gentlemen should have a much better grasp of this subject than Mrs. Selwyn, but she is clearly the best educated of those involved in this conversation, and the gentlemen are aware of this; thus her mockery of their fear of a "weak woman" is both true and an effective way of silencing them. Second, she satirizes their affectation, particularly that of Mr. Lovel. Although Mrs. Selwyn repeatedly attacks him with questions concerning his education, he refuses to admit that he lacks knowledge of the classics in order to maintain his false pretense of intellectual superiority. It is revealed that he is a member of the House of Commons and received a formal education at a university, yet Mrs. Selwyn, a woman, is able to triumph over a man who should theoretically be just as, if not more, learned. In this scene, Mrs. Selwyn uses her learnedness as a tool to expose the ignorance and affectation of these men, but she also explicitly flaunts her knowledge for the sake of establishing her superiority. Extending the logic Richetti uses in his

critique of Mrs. Selwyn, the bet scene could be viewed as an area in which her "violation of female decorum" would make her a comic figure, particularly through her unladylike domination of the conversation and persistent badgering of the gentlemen. However, although the reader finds Mrs. Selwyn's satire amusing, the true "comic figures" and satirical targets in this particular scenario are the men, not Mrs. Selwyn. Mrs. Selwyn emerges from the conversation with a victory, having proven that her education gives her intellectually superiority over the men, while the men are left looking foolish due to their lack of knowledge.

The description of Mrs. Selwyn in this scene coincides exactly with the negative images of educated women presented by those who opposed female education. The definition Fordyce provides of a "learned lady" in his sermons is particularly striking—he calls to mind a woman who "betrays, in short, a boundless intemperance of tongue, together with an inextinguishable passion for shining by the splendor of her own talents" (151). In the bet scene, Mrs. Selwyn seemingly cannot help entering the conversation with force and maintaining a dominant position, and she is prompted to behave in this way because of the pride instilled in her through education. This is problematic in light of the warning Gregory provides to his daughters concerning the male response to such a woman: "If you happen to have any learning, keep it a profound secret, especially from the men, who generally look with a jealous and malignant eye on a woman of great parts, and a cultivated understanding" (19). Mrs. Selwyn certainly risks facing a negative reaction from the gentlemen in this episode, but her pride in her intellectual abilities protects her from worrying about any adverse consequences as a result of her behavior. More "traditional" women like Evelina could not address the men in such a way, but because of Mrs.

Selwyn's confidence in her superiority, she shows a complete lack of concern for their opinions and is therefore free to say what she likes about them. However, even feminist writers like Wollstonecraft would caution Mrs. Selwyn against abusing her seemingly independent position through inappropriate displays of knowledge. Wollstonecraft believes it is through self-control and modesty that educated women will come to be respected, and she argues against the idea that learning will turn all women into "overbearing" characters like Mrs. Selwyn (182). Burney appears to disagree with the assertion that education will not cause women to abandon proper feminine decorum because she links Mrs. Selwyn's behavior with her education. However, Burney does not problematize this lack of modesty as exemplified by Mrs. Selwyn in the same way as Wollstonecraft. Although she does not necessarily recommend that the average woman behave in this way, as she provides characters like Mrs. Mirvan and Evelina herself who demonstrate feminine ideals that are more socially appropriate, she cannot help but exalt Mrs. Selwyn for her ability to use learning as weapon to silence the detestable men who plague her protagonist.

Mrs. Selwyn has yet another opportunity to use her education in order to satirize these same men when Lord Merton, Mr. Coverly, and Mr. Lovel engage in a conversation about their views concerning gender roles and the proper station of women. This discussion begins when Lord Merton asks Lady Louisa to walk with him outside and she answers in the negative, claiming that the heat is too oppressive and inquiring of him, "I'm a sad weak creature,—don't you think I am, my Lord?" (Burney 299) Lord Merton uses this opportunity to praise weakness in women, exclaiming that "a woman wants nothing to recommend her but beauty and good-nature; in everything else she is impertinent or unnatural" (Burney 299). Mr. Lovel and Mr. Coverly echo Lord

Merton's sentiments, with the former even glancing in Mrs. Selwyn's directions before pronouncing, "I have an insuperable aversion to strength, either of body or mind, in a female" (Burney 299). These comments naturally provoke Mrs. Selwyn, who, as an educated woman, has devoted her life to overcoming these constraints. She interjects, "It has always been agreed...that no man ought to be connected with a woman whose understanding is superior to his own. Now, I very much fear, that to accommodate all this good company...would be utterly impracticable, unless we should chuse subjects from Swift's hospital of idiots" (Burney 299). Once again, the men are unable to answer Mrs. Selwyn's insult, and the conversation abruptly ends, but Mrs. Selwyn has made her point. Once again, just as Barker observes in his article, "Here, as elsewhere, Mrs. Selwyn always has the last word" (83). Because the men claim to prefer a woman who is weak and unable to best them in matters of intellect, Burney presents them with a character who is a more than capable opponent, thus revealing that the men hold these opinions concerning women because they subconsciously realize their own intellectual inferiority and fear being exposed, especially by an intelligent woman. When Mrs. Selwyn does exactly that by suggesting "idiots" would be suitable companions for the gentlemen, their worst fears are realized and they are unable to respond, which allows her to have the last word and further emphasize their inferiority in comparison with herself. Additionally, Barker notes that because Mrs. Selwyn has the last word, this "suggests a considerable degree of sympathy on the part of her creator that helps explain Mrs. Selwyn's important position in the novel" (83). Because Mrs. Selwyn is able to take down these men who have harassed Evelina on various occasions throughout the novel, Burney is able to simultaneously reveal her disgust for men of this sort while also applauding Mrs. Selwyn for her defeat

of them. If the men had made a successful attempt to combat her sarcastic remark, it could be argued that Burney ultimately sides with the men over Mrs. Selwyn; however, their silence provides her with a temporary victory over misogyny. The reader is therefore presented with an instance in which Burney champions womanly intellect by juxtaposing the knowledgeable Mrs. Selwyn with the ignorant men.

While Burney does not condemn Mrs. Selwyn's disregard for traditionally feminine traits as a result of her education, her brusque nature seems to become problematic when she is unable to serve as a nurturing, maternal figure for Evelina. When Evelina first discusses Mrs. Selwyn with Miss Mirvan, it seems she is appalled by her new guardian's unconventional ways: "She is extremely clever; her understanding, indeed, may be called *masculine*; but, unfortunately, her manners deserve the same epithet; for, in studying to acquire the knowledge of the other sex, she has lost all the softness of her own" (Burney 224). Here, Evelina recognizes that Mrs. Selwyn's tendency to display masculine traits is a direct result of her education. Evelina goes on to reflect further on Mrs. Selwyn's lack of "softness": "As I have neither courage nor inclination to argue with her, I have never been personally hurt at her want of gentleness; a virtue which, nevertheless, seems so essential a part of the female character, that I find myself more awkward, and less at ease, with a woman who wants it, than I do with a man" (Burney 224). Given the male characters Evelina encounters throughout the text, some of whom pursue her aggressively, it is a significant mark against Mrs. Selwyn that Evelina is less comfortable around her than men as a whole. Evelina has certain expectations for her companion, and her failure to adhere to Evelina's conceptions of what is "essential" regarding feminine conduct is disappointing and anxiety-inducing to the novel's heroine. This discomfort with Mrs.

Selwyn is only increased when it is revealed that Mrs. Selwyn takes delight in "raillery" against Evelina for her own amusement. On one occasion, after Evelina has an embarrassing encounter with Lord Orville, she writes: "During our walk, Mrs. Selwyn tormented me unmercifully...I repented a thousand times having consented to walk alone with her: for though I made the most painful efforts to appear in spirits, her railery quite overpowered me" (Burney 269). Though Mrs. Selwyn is supposed to be encouraging Evelina and serving as her protector, she cannot control her fondness of engaging in intellectual witticisms for her own delight, and this "overpowering" series of jokes exhausts Evelina in a time in which she most needs guidance. In another scene, Mrs. Selwyn interrupts a serious conversation between Evelina and Lord Orville, and instead of giving the couple their privacy, she cannot resist a chance at "raillery" and exclaims, "I find the only way to meet with *you*,—is to enquire for *Lord Orville*. However, don't let me disturb your meditations; you are possibly planning some pastoral dialogue" (Burney 305). After her departure, Lord Orville converses with Mrs. Selwyn, presumably about the nature of his relationship with Evelina, and upon meeting Evelina again, Mrs. Selwyn sarcastically comments on her opportunity to be elevated in social status, saying, "My dear, my sole view is to accustom you a little to your dignity elect, lest, when you are addressed by your title, you should look another way, from an apprehension of listening to a discourse not meant for you to hear" (Burney 305). Burney certainly does seem to regret Mrs. Selwyn's expression of her femininity in these instances, as Evelina takes offense to these jests and longs for the gentle, motherly care she experienced when staying with Mrs. Mirvan. However, though Evelina primarily focuses on Mrs. Selwyn's masculine traits and propensity for teasing when mentioning her guardian in her letters, Burney

does not ignore the ways in which Mrs. Selwyn is able to assist Evelina. Rather, in exploring Mrs. Selwyn's unconventional personality and lifestyle, she reveals how her unmarried "learned lady" is better suited for an active paternal role rather than serving as a comforting maternal figure, which is ultimately more beneficial for Evelina than she realizes.

Mrs. Selwyn is Mr. Villars' proxy during their stay at the Hotwells, and though she finds she must turn to humor at times in order to provide counsel in matters of the heart, she clearly understands her duty as Evelina's protector. Mrs. Selwyn does care for Evelina's welfare immensely, as she is instrumental in Evelina's reunion with her father and acts as her spokesperson throughout the entire ordeal. Evelina even reveals that Mrs. Selwyn is present at her wedding, once again taking seriously her role as Evelina's guardian. As Barker comments, "Though her character remains a critique of the aggressive, manlike woman, Mrs. Selwyn's effectiveness in resolving Evelina's dilemma serves not only to offset such an impression, but helps place the character of a learned lady in a more sympathetic perspective" (84). Women should not necessarily strive to imitate Mrs. Selwyn's disregard for proper feminine conduct, but it cannot be denied that in Mrs. Selwyn's case, ignoring societal expectations produces positive results. Mrs. Selwyn's education, masculine tendencies, and unmarried status allow her to be an independent woman of action, compensating for Evelina's inexperience and feminine fragility by stepping in and acting as her spokesperson in order to provide Evelina with the happy ending that she might not otherwise have received. While Evelina finds fault with Mrs. Selwyn for her lack of delicacy and would ultimately prefer to be guided by Mrs. Mirvan, Burney does not condemn Mrs. Selwyn in the same way. Mrs. Selwyn's snide comments are ultimately translated into action,

and the benefits she is able to bring about as a result of her interference outweigh any embarrassment Evelina feels as a result of her "raillery." Burney also suggests that Mrs. Selwyn is better suited to advocate for Evelina as a "paternal" figure than an actual man because she has no personal interest in Evelina's affairs other than her sincere wish for Evelina's wellbeing. The men portrayed in *Evelina* are often manipulative and seek to convince Evelina to act in a way that is beneficial for themselves; even Mr. Villars does not fully escape this classification, seeking to keep Evelina from society partially because of his desire to keep her under his care. Mrs. Selwyn, however, is not bound by such a desire to "possess" Evelina and is able to view her affairs disinterestedly. Therefore, not only does Mrs. Selwyn appear more "sympathetic" as Barker claims, she also presents an alternative to the constraints of femininity through her abandonment of decorum and impartiality, a way of life that Burney does not condemn.

Burney's elevation of Mrs. Selwyn is also revealed when her "learned lady" is compared with other representations of educated women from the time period. Mrs. Selwyn is similar to Pope's Atossa in that both delight in "exposing knaves, and painting fools" (Pope 119). Mrs. Selwyn's satirical attacks on Mr. Lovel and Lord Merton are called to mind through Pope's language condemning Atossa for her violent behavior. If Mrs. Selwyn's character were limited to these crude interactions with the men around her, it could be claimed that Burney is also dismissive of "learned ladies," but Mrs. Selwyn offers more to the text; she is not a flat character like Atossa. As previously discussed, Mrs. Selwyn's active role in the text, both as an agent of Burney's satire and Evelina's advocate, demonstrates that she is a character to be praised, not censured. A distinction can also be made between Mrs. Selwyn and Valeria. Unlike Burney, Centlivre is unwilling to

suggest that a woman should abandon the domestic realm even if she is educated. Valeria's character reveals that a woman is still marriageable if she is educated, and may in fact need the protection of a sympathetic husband in order to maintain intellectual fulfillment in a patriarchal world. Centlivre is quick to insist that for women, marriage and the consequent establishment in the domestic sphere are compatible with learning, presenting a more appealing position to her audience that does not necessarily challenge the societal desire for sexual complementarity. Burney, however, is less hesitant about challenging conventional ideas about marriage as she presents the unmarried Mrs. Selwyn. Through Mrs. Selwyn's autonomy, Burney argues that a woman does not need a figure like Lovely in order to thrive as a "learned lady"; in fact, Burney suggests that unmarried women can exist outside of the domestic sphere if they are properly educated. Their learning produces the possibility for power and action, and while this behavior often causes violations of decorum, it simultaneously provides another option for intelligent women beyond marriage.

Throughout the text of *Evelina*, Frances Burney demonstrates that Mrs. Selwyn's education is far superior to that of certain men in the text, therefore making her an excellent character to satirize their ignorance. While Mrs. Selwyn does show complete disregard for societal expectations of her sex, leading to a certain lack of delicacy that is especially visible in her interactions with Evelina, Burney is ultimately disposed to be in Mrs. Selwyn's favor, especially because of her crucial role as an agent of satire and her ability to assist Evelina. Through her satirical tendencies and conflict with gender roles, Mrs. Selwyn adds another layer to the text, revealing the author's discreet approval of the power possessed by educated, unmarried women.

CHAPTER FOUR

Memoirs of Emma Courtney

At first glance, it appears that Mary Hays' 1796 novel *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* can be summarized as the tragedy of a woman consumed by passion—infatuated with a man who seemingly does not return her affection, the novel's protagonist harasses him relentlessly through lengthy letters, discontinuing her manic pursuit only upon learning of his secret marriage. It is difficult for the reader to sympathize with Emma because of her blatant violations of decorum and her perseverance bordering on obstinacy, which creates a frustrating reading experience. However, this characterization of Emma is an intentional move by Hays, as her primary intent is to provide insight into the plight of women in eighteenth-century England, particularly those with the potential to accomplish more than their situation allows. Using Emma as an example, Hays explains how an insufficient female education system and vocational opportunities limited to domesticity can lead to the demise of bright young women through the fostering of dependence. The real tragedy of *Emma Courtney*, therefore, is not that Emma is unable to marry her beloved Augustus but that she is driven to near-insanity because of her desire to be with him rather than exercising her potential as an educated woman. Through her often-infuriating protagonist, Hays audaciously argues that women must have the opportunity to pursue lives beyond the domestic realm or else become enslaved by the passions cultivated by their inactivity.

When interpreting *Emma Courtney*, critics often focus on the figure of Augustus Harley, particularly what he symbolizes for Emma and why this contributes to her all-consuming obsession. Anjana Sharma explains that Emma's love for Augustus is spurred by "her need to be loved by a single individual capable of giving her access to

the male bastion of learning” (153). According to Sharma, Emma passionately pursues Augustus not only because of her romantic idealization of him as an individual but because of the knowledge he possesses. Emma hopes a life with him would involve the continuation of her education, which would quench the inherent thirst for knowledge produced by her superior intellect. To Emma, it is Augustus alone who can ensure that she will always have access to knowledge in the traditionally male subjects—without him, she feels doomed to a life of ignorance. Therefore, Sharma claims that “the heart of Emma’s story is her protracted experience of denial of both intellectual and emotional companionship” (148). The main misfortune that Emma experiences, according to Sharma, is that despite her perseverance, she cannot secure the particular kind of romantic relationship she desires, and she sinks into despair as she feels her last chance at intellectual fulfillment slipping away. However, in taking this interpretive stance, Sharma does not consider the entirety of Hays’ message. While it is true that Emma loves Augustus partly because of his intellectual superiority, Sharma overlooks the struggle between passion and reason that is truly “the heart of Emma’s story.” Emma is instilled with romantic notions as a child and appears to overcome them through the education her father provides, but when she finds she is unable to apply her knowledge in a practical, public way, her inactive mind turns to Augustus in order to find a respite from what she feels is a life without purpose. Emma’s infatuation is tragic not because she is unable to marry Augustus and continue her education as his wife; rather, it is because her mental capacity is wasted on a fruitless obsession as the result of societal constraints.

Speaking through Emma, Hays presents the belief that “the habits acquired by early precept and example adhere tenaciously, and are never, perhaps, entirely eradi-

cated” (Hays 85). What a person learns in her early life forever influences the rest of her actions, and this is evident when examining Emma’s early education. Emma is raised by her aunt and uncle, so her earliest learning consequently occurs under their care. Unfortunately, through the stories she chooses to tell her niece, Emma’s well-meaning aunt instills a dangerous love for romantic stories within her: “These I listened to with ever new delight: the more they excited vivid emotions, the more wonderful they were, the greater was my transport: they became my favorite amusement, and produced, in my young mind, a strong desire of learning to read the books which contained such enchanting stories of entertainment” (Hays 14). From a very early age, Emma is taught to value the imagination and romance rather than reality, which feeds her sensibility. She becomes fond of reading, but the books she eagerly devours cultivate a romantic disposition that cannot easily be overcome. Her father notices this when he takes charge of her education: “He soon discovered that my imagination had been left to wander unrestrained in the fairy fields of fiction; but that, of historical facts, and the science of the world, I was entirely ignorant” (Hays 21). Emma’s father does not want his only child to fall victim to the follies cultivated in women as a result of a flimsy education rooted in passion and romance, and under his direction, Emma finally begins to receive a more substantial and structured education. The transformation is evident: instead of her former passionate behavior, “I reasoned freely, endeavored to arrange and methodize my opinions, and to trace them fearlessly through all their consequences: while from exercising my thoughts with freedom, I seemed to acquire new strength and dignity of character” (Hays 25). Hays endorses the education Emma receives from her father—this is the period in which Emma seems to achieve the most personal growth, and it is here that

her potential is most visible. Excelling in the subjects typically reserved to men, Emma overcomes social norms by proving that a female mind is not automatically inferior. By highlighting the benefits of Emma's studies under her father, Hays explores how an education of this sort might improve all women, giving them a serious foundation of virtue and reason rather than frivolity. However, this progress in Emma's personal development is halted upon the death of her father, and she is forced to face the realities of being a woman in eighteenth-century England, namely, the dependence and inactivity she must endure because of her sex.

Emma's father is unable to leave her enough money to sustain an independent life, and as an unmarried woman, she finds that she must rely on others in order to meet even the basic need of a place to live. Emma's situation provides a sharp contrast with Mrs. Selwyn, whose autonomy is crucial to both her character and the overall plot of *Evelina*. While both women have fiercely independent spirits, presumably as the result of their learnedness, financial independence ultimately causes their fates to differ. Mrs. Selwyn is described as "a lady of large fortune" when she is first introduced in the text (Burney 217). Because of her wealth, Mrs. Selwyn is able to act without repercussions—her occasionally obnoxious behavior clearly violates decorum, but her money gives her the ability to act freely. Though she is unemployed, Mrs. Selwyn creates her own opportunities for intellectual fulfillment and is fully engaged in the public sphere, both of which would be impossible if she found herself in Emma's financial situation. Emma has virtually nothing and would have to work for a living in order to attain a state of self-sufficiency. However, she is excluded from employment because of her sex, meaning she cannot move about in the world as Mrs. Selwyn does. While Mrs. Selwyn is able to defend the helpless *Evelina*, Emma cannot even defend herself. The financial

distinction here also contributes to a difference in the messages conveyed by Burney and Hays' "learned ladies." Burney intends to show through Mrs. Selwyn that an unmarried, educated woman can have a place in the world of men and fulfill this role with success, but Hays provides a more realistic portrait of the average educated woman who does not have the financial means to enter the public sphere and must instead resort to dependence for survival.

After spending years studying with her father and developing independent thought and reason, being forced into dependence on distant relatives is a crushing blow to the intelligent Emma. She mourns the difficult situation of being an educated woman yet unable to make a living:

Why was I not educated for commerce, for a profession, for labour? Why have I been rendered feeble and delicate by bodily constraint, and fastidious by artificial refinement? Why are we bound, by the habits of society, as with an adamant chain? Why do we suffer ourselves to be confined within a magic circle, without daring, by a magnanimous effort, to dissolve the barbarous spell? (Hays 32)

While Emma's father hoped that she would be able to use the education with which he provided her for a practical purpose, Emma finds that she is unable to apply her knowledge because of her sex. She wonders why women do not rebel against these norms and how something so artificial can be so binding, but she is unable to develop an answer that satisfies her and views her future of inactivity and dependence with horror. Critic Eleanor Ty interprets this despairing tone that Emma takes on throughout the text as evidence that her initial education in passion still continues to influence her thought: "Paradoxically, while her reading has made her yearn for heroism and romance in her

youth, it also makes her eager to adapt the subject-position of the suffering female victim depicted in the novels” (53). According to Ty, Emma finds something romantic about feeling miserable and downcast, which is why she only makes half-hearted attempts to establish herself independently, preferring to be the “female victim” in hopes of being saved by a romantic hero. However, this stance does not account for the masculine energy Emma exhibits throughout the text. The proverbial “damsel in distress” of a novel would waste away in hopes of being rescued, but Emma’s active mind causes her to intensely search for a remedy to the inactivity produced by dependence. Hays asks the reader to admire Emma’s search for an outlet for her intellectual activity, but she presents Emma’s solution to the situation—her passionate occupation with Augustus—as problematic by highlighting the inner struggle between rational intellect and passion that threatens to destroy her protagonist.

Emma first becomes acquainted with Augustus when she refuses to submit to the cruelty of her relatives and instead chooses to stay with their neighbor, Mrs. Harley. While this decision grants Emma some independence, she is still dependent on Mrs. Harley for support; she is unable to make a living for herself or find intellectual fulfillment outside the domestic sphere. She spends most of her time talking with Mrs. Harley, who constantly speaks of her oldest son, Augustus, familiarizing Emma with his character but with a motherly bias. Before Emma even meets Augustus, she discovers that she is in love with him, and is soon able to identify the causes of this unlikely infatuation through self-reflection:

I was compelled to acknowledge to myself, that solitude, the absence of other impressions, the previous circumstances that had operated on my character, my friendship for Mrs.

Harley, and her eloquent, affectionate, reiterated, praises of her son, had combined to awaken all the exquisite, though dormant, sensibilities of my nature...I felt that I loved an ideal object...with a tender and fervent excess; an excess, perhaps, involving all my future usefulness and welfare. (Hays 60)

Here, Emma reveals that all of her circumstances have united to create an environment in which falling in love with an absent figure is possible. Her passionate tendencies emerge from beneath the layer of reason carefully constructed under her father’s guidance, and, encouraged by Mrs. Harley’s effusive praise of Augustus, she turns to the imagination to create this “ideal object.” As Ty explains, “Instead of being able to direct her strong energies to a useful channel, Emma becomes strongly infatuated and obsessed with an admirable man with a doubtful past” (54). Though she knows almost nothing of Augustus, Emma is carried away by thoughts of what he could be, and her feelings for him are confirmed when he pays a visit to his mother. Emma feels impelled to communicate her love as he is preparing to leave, fearing that the absence of the man who has come to occupy her thoughts will force her to cope with the reality of her situation yet again. However, Augustus becomes distant as Emma’s letters grow lengthier and more passionate—in a vicious cycle, her anxiety over why he is unable to return her affection pushes him away, and passion begins to rule over Emma’s once-rational mind.

As Emma finds herself in the midst of a mental breakdown over Augustus’ indifference, she begins to lose sight of the importance of her intellectual pursuits. Since her education could not be translated into a real-life application, Emma at least aspired to gain knowledge for the means of self-improvement, but she seemingly abandons

her studies for good when Augustus begins to ignore her: "To what *end* shall I seek to improve myself, when I dare no longer hope to be worthy of him" (Hays 97). She views her education as pointless because it cannot secure her the man she loves—despite her intellect, he refuses to entertain Emma's hopes of his returning her affection on the basis of a cause he cannot reveal. Emma comes to rely on her sensibility in these affairs, but glimpses of what appears to be rational thought occasionally break through: at one point in her letters, she pleads with Augustus to "tell me, that I have indulged too long the wild and extravagant chimeras of a romantic imagination. Let us walk together into the palace of Truth" (Hays 90). While Emma realizes that she is being unreasonable, she is unable to exercise her rationality and feels that Augustus alone can help her to regain her senses by confiding in her. This is an example of Emma attempting to make her passion seem reasonable—in a more rational state, Emma would find herself able to cope with the uncertainty of Augustus' circumstances, but she convinces herself that she must have intelligence concerning Augustus' past in order for her to come to terms with his inability to love her in the same way. However, the reader also knows that accessing what Augustus attempts to conceal will not be sufficient for Emma, as she believes she can persuade him to fall in love with her through her perseverance. Emma is extremely resistant to the idea of giving up her pursuit of Augustus: "Should I, then, do violence to my heart, and compel it to resign its hopes and expectations, what can preserve me from sinking into, the most abhorred of all states, *languor and inanity*?" (Hays 117) To abandon all hope and accept Augustus' inability to love her would once again provide Emma with nothing to work toward, and she would revert to a life in which she is unable to exercise her intellectual capacity. Here, it can be seen that it is not the prospect

of losing Augustus as an intellectual companion, as Sharma claims, that motivates Emma's behavior; rather, it is the loss of action that Emma fears will come about if she no longer has the hope of being able to win over Augustus that spurs her feverish correspondence.

After multiple attempts to make Augustus love her, Emma finally discovers that he is secretly married, which kills her hope and allows her to slowly become more reasonable. She still laments her unfortunate circumstances, which can be seen through her correspondence with Mr. Francis, a friend to whom she often looks for guidance. After telling him of her passionate pursuit of Augustus, Mr. Francis responds by censuring Emma for her conduct, particularly her inability to allow her reason to rule over passion, and provides her with advice as to how she can begin to practice rational thought: "The first lesson of enlightened reason...the principle by which alone man can become what man is capable of being, is *independence*" (Hays 140). According to Mr. Francis, Emma must become independent in order to reach her full potential and become a rational person; she should not attempt to rely on any one person as she did with Augustus. Here, Mr. Francis assumes, like Sharma, that Emma was drawn to Augustus because of what he could offer her, not because of larger causes. Emma is quick to disagree with Mr. Francis' condemnation: "Why call her to *independence*—which not nature, but the barbarous and accursed laws of society, have denied her? *This is mockery!*" (Hays 143) Emma believes that Mr. Francis, like her father, does not fully understand the limited opportunities available to women in society. Emma cannot be independent because of her lack of fortune and career prospects, and she is offended by Mr. Francis' suggestion that she must be autonomous in order to achieve the fullness of "enlightened reason." However, while Emma does not take comfort in Mr.

Francis' words, Hays upholds them as central to her overall message. It is true that Emma is held back by her inability to be independent—both her reason and chance to reach her full potential are negatively affected by Emma's dependent state. While Mr. Francis does not seem to take Emma's sex into account when offering her this advice, Hays uses his language to show what should be. All human beings, regardless of sex, should have the ability to live independently in pursuit of their true potential, or else they, like Emma, will be fundamentally limited.

Even though Emma is no longer tormented by her pursuit of Augustus as before, her tragedy is not yet over. Mrs. Harley dies and Emma tries to live independently, but she loses her small amount of money when an investment opportunity falls through, and she is forced to marry Mr. Montague in order to save herself from a life of servitude. She is more accepting of being confined to the domestic realm and enjoys being a mother, but she also takes time for intellectual pursuits for the purpose of self-improvement and even assists Mr. Montague in his career as a doctor. This domestic tranquility does not last long—Augustus reappears after suffering a serious injury, which triggers a series of tragic events culminating in Mr. Montague's suicide. In the midst of the dramatic events in this sequence, it is easy to overlook Hays' final commentary on Emma's inability to fulfill her potential. Because Mr. Montague is away, it is Emma who operates on Augustus when he is brought into her home after his terrible accident, and she performs the surgery with skill and success. However, her husband's assistant, Mr. Lucas, dismisses Emma's abilities: "You are an excellent surgeon... you acted very properly, but...I wish your little nursery may not suffer from your humanity" (Hays 172). It is revealed here that Emma could have been a successful surgeon if she was not forbidden by society to pursue a career, but she is instead con-

finned to the domestic realm by the idea that she is unable to be both a good mother and a member of the public sphere. This scene echoes Mary Wollstonecraft's critique of female confinement in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*—she inquires, "How many women thus waste life away the prey of discontent, who might have practised as physicians, regulated a farm, managed a shop, and stood erect, supported by their own industry, instead of hanging their heads surcharged with the dew of sensibility" (153). Based on the talent Emma displays in this scene, it can be assumed that she could have had a flourishing and fulfilling career, yet she cannot reach this potential and is forced to be inactive, watching from afar and only being permitted to participate in public affairs by accident or in dire circumstances. Hays intentionally includes this scene near the end of the text to emphasize Emma's misfortune—she, and so many other women like her, are capable of greatness but are kept out of the public sphere, causing both individual women and society as a whole to suffer as exceptional human beings are destroyed by dependence and the inability to act.

Emma's medical knowledge and potential for a career in the sciences, a traditionally male area of study, call to mind Valeria's scientific scholarship in *The Bassett Table*. As previously discussed, Lovely supports Valeria in her intellectual pursuits, which reveals Centlivre's position that marriage and learning are indeed compatible. At first, it appears that Emma is in a similar situation given the continuation of her studies as the wife of Mr. Montague. However, though Emma claims to feel some sense of intellectual fulfillment, she notes that the knowledge she acquires is not for her own self-improvement: "I occasionally applied myself to the study of physic, anatomy, and surgery, with the various branches of science connected with them; by which means I rendered myself essentially

serviceable to my friend" (Hays 168-169). Whereas Valeria pursues scientific knowledge for her own benefit, Emma chooses to study only that which will prove useful to her husband. Though it is revealed that Emma does in fact have a talent for medicine and perhaps would have made a skilled physician, Hays regrets that she begins to pursue this path for domestic purposes. Emma's marriage to Mr. Montague is tragic for many reasons, but one of the less obvious tragedies is the loss of individual identity she experiences upon being compelled to marry—the necessity of dependence robs Emma of the possibility to exercise her intellect for a personally satisfying purpose. It seems that Valeria has overcome this consequence of dependence because of the love and special understanding that exist in her relationship with Lovely, both of which are lacking in Emma and Mr. Montague's marriage. However, Hays would argue that while Valeria's situation is better than Emma's, it is not the ideal. Centlivre suggests that Valeria needs Lovely's protection to continue her studies, leaving little room for the independence for which Hays advocates. According to Hays, the average woman must have the option to learn for her own benefit and apply this knowledge to a career if she chooses, but she must have the freedom to accomplish this for herself without feeling that she must depend on men as a means for survival.

Though the focus of *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* is often the tragic love story between Emma and Augustus, Hays' real intent is to provide a warning to her audience by demonstrating the consequences of excluding women from the public realm and confining them solely to domestic affairs. Their education teaches them to be creatures of passion rather than reason, and even if a more substantial education is acquired, a woman accustomed to intellectual activity can sink back into passion upon finding herself dependent upon others and unable to

engage in meaningful work. Hays argues that women must have the ability to be independent in order to become rational individuals capable of reaching their full potential, an experience Emma was denied, causing her breakdown and the tragic events that follow. In opposition to commonly accepted notions about the role of women in society, Hays dares to claim that women must have the option to enter the public sphere rather than feeling forced into marriage. Women deserve more than what society offers them, and a significant change must occur in order to prevent the demise of women that often occurs as the result of confinement and the absence of freedom.

CONCLUSION

When examining how Centlivre, Burney, and Hays grapple with the issue of female education through the characterization of their "learned ladies," a drastic shift can be observed in their responses to commonly held notions concerning the role of women. Centlivre, the earliest writer of the three, makes the suggestion that learning may be introduced into the domestic realm, while Hays, writing at the very end of the eighteenth century, boldly insists that a dependent role in marriage must not be the only option for women with intellectual potential. The evolution of this argument shows the significant connection and conflict between education and marriage in eighteenth-century England, and though Centlivre demonstrates an attempt to reconcile the two, it is eventually asserted in Hays' *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* that educated women cannot fully engage in intellectual pursuits as the result of society's insistence on marriage as a necessity for all women and their subsequent confinement to the private sphere.

Written in 1704, Centlivre's *The Basset Table* is unprepared to endorse

options for women beyond marriage. Even Valeria, the masculine “learned lady” obsessed with biology, is capable of finding love, which indicates Centlivre’s view that marriage is possible for all. However, Valeria’s ultimate union with Lovely allows Centlivre to explore the possibilities for the continuation of learning within a marriage. Lovely supports Valeria in her scholarship, and it is understood that his presence saves her from a marriage to a figure like Captain Hearty, whose subscription to traditional gender roles and lack of appreciation for her intellectual capabilities would ensure the discontinuation of her studies. While it is unclear whether Lovely expects Valeria to fully devote herself to domestic affairs as his wife, Centlivre stresses that Lovely fell in love with Valeria because of her intellect, so it can be reasonably assumed that he would encourage further research within the context of their marriage. Lovely’s support allows Centlivre to reach for the stance that marriage and learning can be compatible, provided that the husband is willing to protect his wife in her deviation from decorum. Valeria is very much at risk of losing her access to learning when *The Basset Table* begins, but the play’s satisfying conclusion involves Lovely “saving” Valeria from this fate. Women should be married, according to Centlivre, and it is quite possible for them to find a husband who will support their individual identity. However, it is not to be expected that Valeria will take her studies into the public sphere or pursue a scientific career—it is only within the protection Lovely provides in the home that she can engage in her work as a female scientist.

While Centlivre shows how marriage can ultimately be beneficial for an educated woman, Burney uses the character of Mrs. Selwyn in *Evelina* to explore the possibilities of an unmarried “learned lady.” Mrs. Selwyn proves that through a combination of learning and self-sufficiency, a woman can act on her own behalf and even advocate

for others. Unlike Valeria, Mrs. Selwyn does not need the presence of a husband to protect her from the abnormality of being an educated woman. She is financially independent, and this is what provides her with the security Valeria receives from Lovely. Mrs. Selwyn’s masculine energy and sharp wit contribute to her freedom, but it is really her immense fortune that allows her to move about in the public sphere without regard for typical feminine behavior. Mrs. Selwyn exhibits the possibility for women to opt out of marriage, but they must have a sufficient education and, more importantly, money in order to thrive as an unmarried woman.

Neither Centlivre nor Burney account for the problem of the educated yet unmarried and penniless woman in their works, but Hays brings this figure to light in *Memoirs of Emma Courtney*. Like Valeria and Mrs. Selwyn, Emma possesses a noticeably superior intellect. After receiving a substantial education from her father, Emma longs to enter the public sphere in order to save herself from a life of dependence on others, but she does not have the financial means for self-sufficiency. Additionally, she cannot engage in meaningful work to create her own fortune—the only employment available to her is servitude. Marriage is Emma’s only viable option, so she is driven into a loveless union with Mr. Montague to save herself from destitution. This is a different kind of protection than what Lovely is able to offer Valeria as it is grounded in necessity rather than mutual esteem, which Hays finds problematic. The absence of fortune and the consequent necessity of marriage not only robs Emma of the chance to be self-sufficient through intellectually stimulating labor but also eliminates any possibility for choice. Hays does not condemn marriage; rather, she illustrates the consequences of forcing women into marriage and domestic responsibilities when they have the potential to find fulfillment elsewhere. The average woman must have the possibility for

self-sufficiency available to wealthy women if they so choose because, as Hays and Wollstonecraft both assert, female potential is wasted when there are no opportunities for it to be exercised, and society suffers as it clings to its clearly defined gender roles.

The representation of female education throughout eighteenth-century English literature is significant because it provides the framework for authors to explore the possibility of female autonomy. If a woman is properly educated, she will reject the frivolity encouraged by an education rooted in the “polite social accomplishments” and learn to exercise her true intellectual potential. She comes to possess the necessary mental faculties for life in the public sphere, yet she is often kept from expressing her learning by societal barriers that seek to keep her dependent. While a happy marriage or inherited fortune could provide an educated woman with varying degrees of independence, as seen in the cases of Valeria and Mrs. Selwyn, true freedom for the average woman can only come about through having the option to apply one’s knowledge to a career. This would allow women to freely exercise their intellectual capabilities, but it also provides them with the opportunity to become independent through their own efforts, truly reaching a state of self-sufficiency. However, Hays in particular acknowledges that there must be a substantial social reformation so women can access this possibility for their lives, but a change of this magnitude can only take place through the deliberate efforts of women who attempt “to dissolve the barbarous spell.” The feminists of the nineteenth century and beyond did exactly that, advocating for a society in which women could have access to a proper education, engage in meaningful work, and become truly independent in the public sphere. The feminist movement continues today as women strive for increased equality, but the very completion of this thesis indicates to me that “the barbarous

spell” envisioned by Hays has been lifted. As a general trend, women outnumber men in universities. They can now pursue careers and live self-sufficiently; other options exist for them beyond marriage. Women, including myself, have benefitted greatly from the eradication of “the barbarous spell,” and it is in part because of the ideas developed in the eighteenth century that we have now become active participants in the classroom, workplace, and world.

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