Enlightened Women: A Discussion on Education, Marriage and the Domestic Sphere in Eighteenth Century Society

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Women's roles and expectations in traditional society consisted of finding a suitable marriage arrangement, raising children, and managing a household. Before the eighteenth century, these tasks did not require a formal education or training; mothers provided what instruction their daughters needed. With the dawning of the Enlightenment and its emphasis on education, humanism, science, and scholarly discussion, the expectations of women's learning changed and with it, their roles within the household. Within British society, women now had to run the household, manage the accounts, educate their children, entertain their husband's guests, carry on conversations and correspondence, and show accomplishment in the arts, sewing, music, and dance.

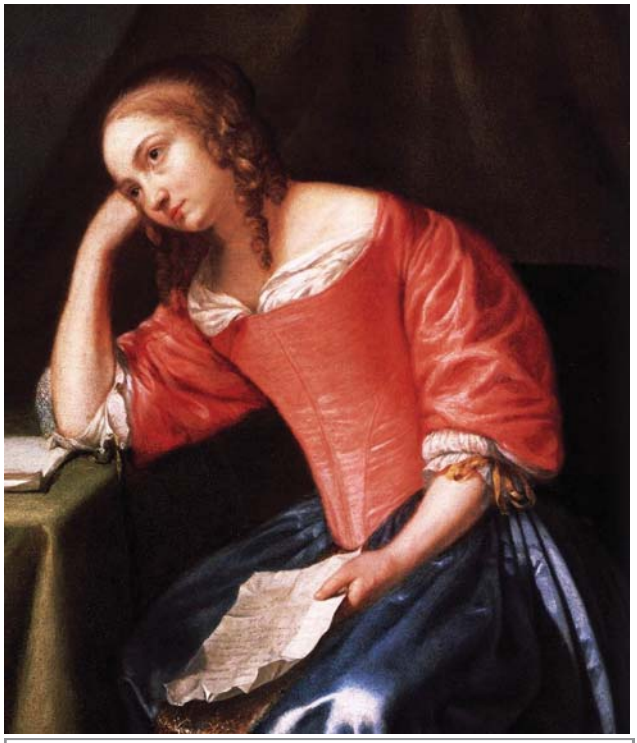

Figure 1 *Young Girl Holding a Letter*. Oil on canvas by Caspar Netscher, c. 1665. Private collection.

This rise in expectations accompanied increased discussion over the nature and capabilities of women. Not only were there new ideas, but increased trade, the Union of the Crowns in Britain, and a growing middle class created new opportunities for social advancement, interaction between the classes, and a desire to connect with a wider

world. In Edinburgh, and in the whole of Britain, the changing role of women and domesticity in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries found its way into popular discourse in the form of conduct literature and philosophical debate. Often this debate included arguments over the physical capabilities of women to learn and which subjects allowed women acceptance into greater society.

A popular topic for literature in the eighteenth and nineteenth century was the conduct and education of young women. These works discussed how to run a household, how to be a good wife and mother, acceptable topics for discussion and reading, and how to present oneself in society to further a husband's career, or to attract a mate. The publication of conduct literature such as this spanned the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries with one of the earlier examples written in 1739 by Dr. Alexander Monro in Edinburgh, and continuing on with writings by other British authors such as Catherine Macaulay, Mary Wollstonecraft, Laetitia Matilda Hawkins, and Priscilla Wakefield. Though these works addressed many areas of a young woman's life, one thing they all had in common was a discussion on the state how education defined their place in society.

Alexander Monro, a leading physician at the University of Edinburgh in the mid-eighteenth century, wrote a letter to his daughter Margaret sometime around 1735 with the goal of instructing her on how to act in public.[1] According to his letter, he felt that his daughter was capable of more than the conventional education provided.[2] He was not alone. Several advertisements in the newspapers of Edinburgh, Scotland show that educational opportunities for young women increased through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. There was concern, however, as to how polite society would accept that uncommon education.

The growth of the middle class and the desire for family fortunes to be secured through marriage alliances, created new expectations and interactions between several classes in society. Many in society felt that young women, who were too educated, potentially harmed their chances of receiving a proposal of marriage, and therefore, they put their families' well-being at risk.

Several authors of conduct literature addressed the pitfalls of women learning beyond the traditional skills. Catherine Macaulay, author of the 1790 text *Letters on Education*, argued that the social setting brought to light the differences between men and women with women afraid to show their true learning for fear of rejection by society.[3] Dr. Monro told his daughter that if he caught her showing off her advanced education, he would forbid her from further study for fear of her

jeopardizing her place in society.[4] He worried that by showing the public she was capable of speaking Greek, or complex scientific thought, Margaret would not be able to find a husband, which society saw as her ultimate goal. This phenomenon had never really occurred before. Women now had access to education, to training, and to a wider scope of possibilities than they ever had in the past. The discussion on the potential of humanity that arose with the Enlightenment, also started to address the potential of women.

The idea that women had a limited capacity for learning, especially in regards to scientific and mathematical studies, permeated scientific and philosophical thought during these centuries. The Enlightenment introduced ideas of natural abilities and the limits of humanity.[5] Lynn Abrams stated, in her monograph *The Making of the Modern Woman in Europe,* that the way women fit into European society dictated the language used to describe their bodies and minds.[6] According to Abrams, the Enlightenment redefined the role of the modern woman.[7] Humanism and the idea that men had an unlimited potential led to a new way of looking at the differences between gender roles. Philosophers and other writers did not completely abandon old ideas, but the role of wife and mother took on higher status and the contributions a woman made to the domestic sphere required greater access to education.[8]

Physical limitations as defined in the preceding centuries shaped the discussion over women's intelligence.[9] Physical ability shaped morality and intelligence. Prior to the eighteenth century, the belief that women were a mirror image of men, but weaker and imperfect, shaped the social roles of women.[10] Jean Jacques Rousseau used his character Sophy, in his book *Emile* to describe the nature of female. According to Rousseau, "But for her sex, a woman is a man; she has the same organs, the same needs, the same faculties. The machine is the same in its construction; its parts, its working, and its appearances are similar. Regard it as you will the difference is only in degree."[11] Through the course of scientific observation and examination, the idea that women were simply inferior men changed. The understanding that women had their own characteristics and natures moved to the forefront of discussion, though the debate remained over what that separate identity meant in regards to learning.[12]

This new understanding of women's physical differences led to new discussions over their natural role in society. The new ideas about women's anatomy did not change the notion that marriage and children were the ultimate

goal. Many saw women as being sensitive because their nervous systems were delicate and more attuned to stimuli. Because women's bodies were small in comparison to a man's, many scientists and philosophers considered women closer in ability to children, particularly in their intelligence. There also existed the idea that reproduction and menstruation made women susceptible to mental illness and mental exhaustion and therefore women were not physically able to learn in the same way.[13] Women who stepped outside of the norm and attempted to pursue higher learning often earned a diagnosis of hysteria and the cure prescribed consisted of marriage and children as well as the abstention of intellectual pursuits.[14] The feminine ideal was a woman dedicated to her husband and children, who contributed to the beautification of her home

To attract a husband and appear acceptable in the eyes of society, beauty was important. Several writers expressed the concern that too much study caused the deterioration of facial features including a serious demeanor and a wrinkled brow. Women, though they could learn deeper and more advanced subjects, should instead pursue more frivolous and acceptable types of education.[15] Even so, many families still provided a sound education for their daughters and were well educated themselves.

With the growing debate over women's roles and intelligence, questions about the proper type of education often entered into public discourse. In a letter to *The Caledonian Mercury,* a popular newspaper in eighteenth century Edinburgh, an author named S. Whyte discussed the need to increase the available education for women. The author felt that the underlying fear of women gaining an advantage over men in society led to their forced ignorance.

> This dread of a learned Lady, be it real or affected, is, in truth, a symptom of weakness, it proceeds from low, contracted prejudices, and the consequential reasoning upon assumed and partial principles, is neither just nor rational. By learning and learned, these high advocates for scientifical [sic] monopoly always tacitly understand, and confine themselves to the knowledge of languages, and thence on founding the means with the end, illogically conclude that women should not be in any respect taught, nor permitted to reason, or judge for themselves.[16]

This underlying fear contributed to the idea that women only needed to learn

domestic skills to fulfill their role in society.

Authors of conduct literature, several of them women, railed against the idea that women could not learn due to their weak character. Jean Jacques Rousseau in *Emile* claimed that social dictates and physical limitations should determine the learning a woman could access. Rousseau argued that the goal of a young woman from her infancy was to learn to please men, to take care of her family, and to learn to be agreeable.[17] Many women argued differently. Catherine Macaulay pointed out that young women grew up at a disadvantage when they were encouraged to put greater emphasis on their outward appearance than their natural intelligence. This countered in many ways the new expectations of the eighteenth century wife.

Women ran the household, educated their children, entertained their husband's guests through lively conversation, dancing and music, and created art to decorate their homes. All of this was to help their husbands advance through society and in their careers. Mothers provided the first education and instruction to their children. One of the earliest lessons many children received was the morality accepted by society. To provide a virtuous example, wives received instruction to resist engaging in any vices that would detract from their fulfilling their proper role or to bring shame on their families.[18] Though raising children was their primary occupation, a good wife also had to be accomplished in many areas including conversation in several languages, and particularly artistic pursuits such as dancing, music, and art.

The need to speak more than one language increased as international travel and business arrangements brought people from all over Europe together. A good wife was able to make her husband's foreign business contacts comfortable by conversing in their native tongue. An increase in language tutor's advertisements in several local newspapers reflected the growing demand for multilingualism. Instructors in many Romance languages such as French, Italian, Spanish, or even Latin offered their services. Many in society considered these languages safe for young women because they did not require detailed study and learning often took place through speech only and not the difficult study of grammar.[19] If examined alongside the conduct literature for the period, the newspaper advertisements show that foreign language education was an important part of a young woman's schooling, there were, however, limitations on what was acceptable for young women. One woman, who contributed to a collection of

essays compiled by Vicesimus Knox, told of how society shunned her when her peers discovered her unorthodox education. She spoke several languages including French, Italian, and Latin, all of which were acceptable for women to know. She also had a knowledge of Greek which many felt was masculine and for women to study it took away from her femininity.[20]

Like many parents, Dr. Monro, instructed his daughter Margaret to guard her intelligence and command of languages closely.

> I don't propose to make you so learned that you can have any pretensions to be a critic in languages, that might give you too much a taste for books and make you neglect the necessary female offices; and I flatter myself that you will have good sense enough to know that you are not to display any of this sort of knowledge, or to make use of any uncommon words without resolving to be envied, criticized and laughed at. If I observe you exposing yourself to censure by making an ill use of any sort of knowledge which I may give you the opportunity of acquiring, I shall soon stop short and let you remain as ignorant as I can of everything beyond what relates to the plainest domestic life.[21]

Parents, though they often wanted to educate their daughters as much as possible, also worried that public displays of that education would put off potential suitors and bring shame on the family for not raising a proper, feminine, young woman.

Oral communication was not the only area of instruction for young women. Correspondence consisted of writing letters and so penmanship, grammar, and composition instruction was encouraged at an early age.[22] Society expected that women could write intelligent letters and to be able to spell correctly. To do otherwise would have indicated poor breeding and would have potentially damaged their family reputation.

Entertaining guests did not only mean conversing with guests, it also meant dancing and music. Dancing was a common occurrence either as formal social entertainment or as an after dinner activity at people's homes. Many houses of the period had drawing rooms suitable for dancing or playing music. Dr. Monro wanted his daughter to learn dancing because it encouraged a healthy body and mind. He also wanted her to have dancing instruction because it was a necessary skill for fitting into high society. Many commentators also felt that dancing increased feminine characteristics such as grace in movement and confidence, which indicated a well-bred lady.[23] A particularly telling commentary in the *The*

Caledonian Mercury discussed the importance of outward grace as a means to attract a husband.

> Dancing is a particular I should have touched on, as the very principle of all; a genteel carriage has charms which approach even beauty itself: let a man walk behind a lady who is well made, and has a genteel carriage, though her face be hid from him, he cannot choose but to fancy her handsome too whether nature has been favourable to her or not: and that is an effort that the reading of forty thousand mathematical or metaphysical Latin or Greek books, would not have produced.[24]

Though there was increasing pressure to educate women in non-domestic skills, old standards prevailed. Society accepted the outward appearance of a woman more often than her intelligence.

A young woman should not only be able to dance, but also to sing and play music for her guests. Dr. Monro wanted his daughter to not only be a discerning observer of musical performances, but to play an instrument and to sing. Common instruments of the day were the harpsichord, violin, guitar, and flute. Young women often performed for family or guests, after dinner or during gatherings. It was a way to show off the skills and talents of daughters and to display the proper conduct of the family.[25] These were also skills considered engaging in a wife and mother.[26]

In addition to language, music, and dancing, artistic skills increased a woman's value in society. Pursuits such as art and needlework were virtuous activities for young women. They occupied one's time and provided a way to decorate the home. These were traditional female accomplishments. Advice such as that by Dr. John Gregory to his daughters expressed the value of learning these feminine skills:

> The intention of your being taught needle-work, knitting, and such like, is not on account of the intrinsic value of all you can do with your hands, which is trifling, but to enable you judge more perfectly of that kind of work, and to direct the execution of it in others. Another principal end to enable you up, in a tolerably agreeable way, some of the many solitary hours you must necessarily pass at home. [27]

Traditional women's work included spinning, needlework, sewing, and skills such as painting. It was important for every woman to be proficient in these skills so she could do her part to help her family, in all stations of life. Many authors of the period felt that learning different skills and artistic styles not only helped by beautifying the home, but it also taught the value of price and quality of goods. By understanding the materials, time, and skill required for making an object, wives could make wise purchase and instruct servants in the best and most efficient ways of doing things.[28]

Many of these skills required specialized teaching. As the middle and upper classes grew in wealth, there was an increase in tutors, governesses and even boarding schools that offered to instruct young women in the proper skills. Advertisements for girls' boarding schools and educational opportunities appear in the British newspapers in the mid-to late-eighteenth century. Girls learned to read, to write, to do arithmetic, geography, to speak foreign languages, play, and read music, draw and paint, and manage a busy household. The advertisements also showed the types of teachers that were acceptable to teach young women, the role women played in the field of education, the skills that were valued for women to learn and the availability of educational opportunities for young women during the eighteenth century.[29]

Though the Enlightenment brought new ways of looking at the roles of men and women, the traditional gender roles remained intact during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Women found themselves caught between an availability of resources and educational opportunities and the traditional role of wife and mother. The increase in wealth and social mobility that occurred during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries also placed greater emphasis on acceptance by wider society. There was a fine balance created between acceptable and unacceptable knowledge as tutors, boarding schools, and other means of education grew in availability. The increase in education also influenced the role of women in the domestic sphere. They now had to run the household, manage the accounts, educate their children, entertain their husband's guests, carry on conversations and correspondence, and show accomplishment in the arts, sewing, music, and dance. In popular sentiment, the learned woman was still somewhat of an oddity. At times, people saw her as someone to be tolerated, but not right to marry. Privately, however, evidence points to women who were well educated and well read.

Notes

1. Alexander Monro, *The Professor's Daughter: An Essay on Female Conduct* in *Proceedings of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh* 26 no. 1, ed. P.A.G. Monro (Glasgow: Bell and Bain Ltd, 1996), 9.

2. Monro, *The Professor's Daughter*, 9.

3. Catherine Macaulay, *Letters on Education* in *Women's Writing 1778-1839 an Anthology,* ed. Fiona Robertson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 35.

4. Monro, *The Professor's Daughter*, 17.

5. R.F. Teichgraeber, *Politics and Morals in the Scottish Enlightenment* (London: University Microfilms International, 1978), 11.

6. Lynn Abrams, *The Making of Modern Woman in Europe: 1789-1918* (London: Longman, 2002), 17.

7. Abrams, *Modern Woman*, 18.

8. Abrams, *Modern Woman,* 19-20.

9. Abrams, *Modern Woman*, 20.

10. Abrams, *Modern Woman*, 21.

11. J.J. Rousseau, *Emile or Education*, trans. Barbara Foxley, M.A. (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1930), 321.

12. Abrams, *Modern Woman*, 22.

13. Abrams, *Modern Woman*, 22.

14. Abrams, *Modern Woman*, 25.

15. Laetitia Matilda Hawkins, *Letters on the Female Mind (1773),* 131.

16. *The Caledonian Mercury (TCM),* October 21, 1772.

17. J.J. Rousseau, *Emile or Education*, trans. Barbara Foxley, M.A. (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1930), 321.

18. Macaulay, *Letters on Education,* 37.

19. *The Caledonian Mercury (TCM),* April 8, 1771.

20. Vicesimus Knox, *Essays, Moral and Literally on the Insensibility of the Men to the Charms of the Female Mind Cultivated with Polite and Solid Literature, in a Letter, 1779.* In *Women in the Eighteenth Century: Constructions of Femininity,* ed. Vivian Jones (London: Routeledge, 1990), 106 -108.

21. Monro, *The Professor's Daughter,* 17.

22. *TCM*, November 22, 1780; December 6, 1780; December 16, 1780; December 23, 1780; September 15, 1781.

23. Monro, *The Professor's Daughter,* 11.

24. *TCM,* April 8, 1771.

25. Monro, *The Professor's Daughter,* 12.

26. Monro, *The Professor's Daughter,* 12.

27. John Gregory, *A Father's Legacy to his Daughters* (London: G. Robertson, 1792), 86-87.

28. Monro, *The Professor's Daughter,* 12-13.

29. TCM, August 1, 1771; July 24, 1779; December 13, 1779; April 23, 1781; April 26, 1781; October 29, 1783; January 28, 1784.

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