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Femininity and Feminism in Courtship in Eighteenth-Century Britain

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Marriage practices in eighteenth-century Britain have been widely discussed by scholars of the topic. While the study of courtship and gender are topics discussed generously in many books about eighteenth century marriage, the power that women had in deciding their partner when they were being courted has not been given great attention. To most that decide to embark in studying the topic of courtship in the late 1600s leading into the 1700s, it would seem as if women had no say in who their lifelong partner would be. However, women could use the power of their femininity to persuade the men in their lives, especially their fathers, in giving them a voice on deciding their future husband. This use of a woman's femininity as power did not apply to all women in Britain, however. It is important to note that the gentry class women, rather than the elite class women, had more leeway in choosing a partner. This is particularly because elite women had much more at stake than women of the gentry class did; elite women had more land, more of a dowry, and more status that would only be increased by marrying into the right family. In other words, although women of the gentry class did have to marry a respectable man, the elite women had the pressure of elevating the family name through marriage, rather than keeping them at the same level of status.

Many authors of the history of genteel women and eighteenth-century marriage simply touch upon the topic of the power of femininity within their writings. Amanda Vickery asserts that women were not as confined in their roles as other historians argue, but that the boundaries that were set by men for women to follow were much wider and much more mobile. For instance, as Vickery states, genteel women were “. . .hostile to errant duchesses, adulterous wives, female fraudsters and pregnant servants, holding to the view that the woman who set the world at naught was very far gone.”¹ These characteristics, according to Vickery, show that the eighteenth-century woman did not think that the world was not a place for them, but rather that

¹ Amanda Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter* (London: Yale University Press, 1998), 11-12.

the world was a place for them to experiment and make their own name. Furthermore, as Vickery also states, “Yet, as it will emerge, even the bounds of propriety were wider than historians have been apt to admit,” also meaning that women were not as confined in society by men as historians discuss. Vickery’s chapter on “Love and Duty” is the section that primarily discusses courtship. Here, Vickery gives only one example of the power a genteel woman held over a man as she was being courted. Robert Parker of Alkincoats was courting Elizabeth Parker of Browsholme, a genteel woman, for many years. Their correspondence of eighty-one letters between 1745 and 1851 show the painstaking task Robert Parker had of persuading Elizabeth Parker to marry him and convince her father that he was a good fit for their family.² Vickery’s description of the letters as well as the lengthy timeline between them show the reader that women had the feminine power to criticize and judge a man before a marriage proposal were to take place. As the six year timeline implies, Elizabeth Parker had Robert Parker endure six-year-long criticism before he finally resorted to making her jealous in order to gain her interest. Unfortunately, this is the only instance within Vickery’s book that feminine power within courtship is addressed, but it gives the reader insight into how women actually possessed some sort of power in decision-making when it came time to marry.

Bridget Hill touches upon femininity, female education, and most importantly, marriage and courtship in her writing. While she gives many excerpts from various novels that touch upon the subject of women and courtship in eighteenth-century Britain, she mostly deals with women not having any power or say in choosing a partner. For instance, Hill gives the reader an excerpt from a letter from 1734 written by Samuel Richardson, where the character Miss Harriet Byron wrote to Miss Lucy Shelby about how women have very little to do with deciding who they are going to marry. For example, Miss Harriet Byron wrote; “Is it, that they will not speak out, lest,

² Vickery, *The Gentleman’s Daughter*, 45.

if their wishes should not be crowned with success by *one* man, they should deprive themselves of the chance to succeed with *another*?”³ Here, Hill gives a distinct example where a woman is describing the confines she faces in a male society, instead of giving an example of a woman using her power of femininity as persuasion. The rest of the chapters on marriage seem to follow this model, by either describing to the reader how women had no true power, or describing how men betrayed their wives and how the women had to deal with it.

Katherine Sobba Green also aims to inform the reader about how different female authors of the eighteenth century used novels about courtship to gain some kind of power within a male-dominated society. Within her writing, Green examines a variety of authors pertinent to the discussion of feminine power in courtship, and these authors include Fanny Burney and Jane Austen. Green’s review of Fanny Burney’s *Cecilia* often touches upon courting because *Cecilia* is mainly about a young woman navigating the world of marriage and her naivetés. Green writes; “As In *Evelina*, Burney’s treatment of certain social scenes forces to the reader’s attention the conflict between female autonomy and male consumerism.”⁴ In this sentence, Green is acknowledging that Burney aims to write about how women struggled to have power in a mostly male society. Green’s analysis of *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen also praises the way that Austen wrote about female power in courtship and their resistance to a society based on patriarchy. In her analysis of Austen, Green writes; “Lizzy’s charges rhetoric and the stand she takes against patriarchal exchange mark her as a resistant figure worthy of emulation by young women readers of Austen’s period.”⁵ Not only is Green acknowledging Austen’s stance against a patriarchal society, she is also acknowledging that young women that read Austen might be inspired to feel the same kind of empowerment and resistance.

³ Bridget Hill, *Eighteenth Century Women: An Anthology* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1984), 77.

⁴ Katherine Soba Green, *The Courtship Novel, 1740-1820: A Feminized Genre* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1991), 81.

⁵ Green, *The Courtship Novel, 1740-1820: A Feminized Genre*, 158.

Lawrence Stone describes, in stages by date, how families, sex, and marriage evolved, if at all. Stone's description of companionate marriage specifically surrounding the eighteenth century discusses how marriages supposedly became more companion-like. Stone fails to, however, discuss feminine power and courtship. Instead, he discusses how husband and wife might have shifted from business partners to more loving partners. This can give the reader the notion that the woman had the opportunity to choose whom she wanted to marry based on love, but again, this is not expressly discussed by Stone. While one hopes this is the case since Stone is stating that there was supposedly more love and compassion between couples in the eighteenth century, one cannot be sure because he does not discuss courtship in particular, but rather marriages that have already happened.

The power of femininity during the eighteenth century in Britain will be examined by exploring a plethora of primary sources including Jane Austen novels, Frances Burney novels, plays, and works by Mary Wollstonecraft and other various feminist authors. During the eighteenth century, feminist writing came in many forms, but two forms are discussed here; Wollstonecraft's, which is known for being much more assertive and straight-forward, and Austen and Burney's, which were much more subdued and accepted within society. Within this paper, this contrast is discussed, and the subtle ways in which Austen and Burney give their characters "feminine power" will be highlighted in order to understand how they were advocating for their own sex, especially when dealing with issues of marriage and courtship. Through the thorough examination of these primary sources, it will become clear that feminist novelists during the eighteenth century gave women subtle, yet noticeable feminine powers, advocating for their sex and their desire to have control over their own lives.

The gentry class in eighteenth-century Britain were a step below the elite, highest class in society. During the eighteenth century in Britain, the gentry class encompassed a wide variety of people with different occupations, including doctors, attorneys, and merchants. However, the one defining factor that made someone a member of the gentry class was the ownership of land.⁶ Peter Coss, of Cardiff University, states that at one point in England, the terms “gentry” and “nobility” were interchangeably used to address the nobility.⁷ It is clear in reading Coss that it is very difficult to decide when the gentry and the nobility became known as separate classes, one lower than the other, but he does note that the change did take place gradually and the class separations were not written about until the nineteenth century.⁸ The fact that the gentry and the nobility were once synonymous terms is important to note because that means that at one point, there was no distinct upper-middle class in England. The gentry, once the class was defined as different than the nobility rather than being synonymous, described themselves as being ‘polite’ or ‘genteel’ because they had no notion of a stratified middle-class hierarchy.⁹ This means that the term defining this class of lesser landowning individuals whom held a variety of jobs was a term placed on them by historians of eighteenth-century Britain, rather than themselves.

The gentry were also an educated class. As Patrick Wallis and Cliff Webb describe, “. . .the education and training that gentry children received was inflected by conflicting concerns about preserving or even improving their social status, conserving the family’s lands as a viable estate, and securing future incomes.”¹⁰ Their study, which encompassed 2,231 sons of gentry families, resulted in fourteen percent of gentry men participating in higher education, nine

⁶ Amanda Vickery, *The Gentleman’s Daughter*, 13.

⁷ Peter Coss, *The Origins of the English Gentry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 2.

⁸ Coss, *The Origins of the English Gentry*, 2.

⁹ Vickery, *The Gentleman’s Daughter*, 13.

¹⁰ Patrick Wallis and Cliff Webb, “The education and training of gentry sons in early modern England,” *Social History* 36, no.1 (2011): 36, <http://web.a.ebscohost.com.libserv-prd.bridgew.edu/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=5&sid=b827b165-548f-433f-a13a-b2d0bf699dbd%40sessionmgr4001&hid=4114>.

percent attending Inns of Court, five percent attending both universities and Inns of Court, and twelve percent participating in apprenticeships.¹¹ These percentages can tell us something significant about the sample size, but also about the general population of gentry sons; most were educated in some form, even if it was not directly through the university. It is also important to note that although a decent portion of sons went into apprenticeships, the apprenticeships were high-status apprenticeships that had monopolies on political offices and were members of guilds.¹² This tells us that the apprenticeships that the gentry class men were receiving were not simply shoemaker apprenticeships, but high-class work such as merchant companies, that could elevate the family's name and wealth in the upper-middle class society. However, not all sons were able to receive an education; as the sons in the family progressively got younger, the chances of receiving an education became slimmer.¹³ The fact that not every son in a gentry family (depending on family size) became educated in some form, means that gentry wealth was certainly not as vast as the wealth of the elites, which means that education was certainly a separating factor between the gentry class and the elite class.

Politeness was another aspect of the gentry class for both men and women. According to Susan M. Fitzmaurice, “. . . politeness concerned the sensitive practice of social considerateness through manners, dress and, most importantly of all, conversation, that were appropriate to an urban context, with urbane company.”¹⁴ Therefore, men and women were expected to act proper at all times, conveying a sense of sophistication and good upbringing. Hospitality and politeness were also crucial to “the maintenance of social credit and political power.”¹⁵ Simply put, this

¹¹ Wallis and Webb, “The education and training of gentry sons in early modern England,” 43.

¹² Wallis and Webb, “The education and training of gentry sons in early modern England,” 44.

¹³ Wallis and Webb, “The education and training of gentry sons in early modern England,” 48.

¹⁴ Susan M. Fitzmaurice, “The Commerce of Language in the Pursuit of Politeness in Eighteenth-Century England,” *English Studies* 4 (1998): 312, <http://web.a.ebscohost.com.libserv-prd.bridgew.edu/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=7&sid=b827b165-548f-433f-a13a-b2d0bf699dbd%40sessionmgr4001&hid=4114>.

¹⁵ Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter*, 196.

means that the way a particular person in the gentry acted, whether polite or not, could determine if their social status remained the same or was hindered, and if they were to hold or possibly run for political office. If they were already in office, acting impolite could cause them to lose favor with society and risk not being reelected.

Courting, in eighteenth-century Britain, was the process by which two people would marry and each of the descriptions of the gentry class, written above, directly correlates to the process of courtship in that a person's status in society as well as how they carried themselves correlated to who their potential spouses could be. In the gentry class, courting was a strategic way of marrying off the women in the family to men who could secure or elevate the family name, and vice versa. According to Lawrence Stone, marriage had three purposes: to birth male heirs, keep property within the family, and to form alliances, whether political or with property.¹⁶ In order to ensure that these three purposes were fulfilled, daughters were taken out into the world to find an eligible suitor once they were of age. Alan Macfarlane writes that during marriage negotiations, two separate things were discussed; financial details and psychological adjustments.¹⁷ Financial details had to often be sorted out because marriage between two people, especially of the upper-middle-class, wanted to keep the wealth that they had or heighten it if it were possible. In eighteenth-century Britain, marriage was seen as a business negotiation rather than searching for true love. However, psychological adjustments were also discussed during marriage negotiations because if a match was not well suited or well adjusted to, that marriage would result in failure. Ideally, the longer a period of courting lasted, the easier it would be to

¹⁶ Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex, and Marriage in England 1500-1800* (New York: Harper Paperback, 1977), 37.

¹⁷ Alan Macfarlane, *Marriage and Love in England 1300-1840* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1986), 291-292.

adjust to married life and the likelihood for a romantic connection, rather than just financial, would occur.¹⁸

Although marriage was seen as a contract between the two parties, romantic connections were not obsolete. In eighteenth-century Britain, making romantic connections could make a marriage bond even stronger. Courtship in eighteenth-century Britain can be seen as a game where the key players are the people who are looking to marry and the referee is the person who is there to make sure that the rules of courtship are not broken. There were only two ends to the game of courtship; marriage in which everyone that takes part is a winner, or no marriage, where the process begins again with a new marriage prospect. In reference to the rules, they are mostly rules of properness and politeness, rather than actual written rules that need to be adhered to. This means that with each new couple that partakes in the act of courting, rules may be bent or changed to their liking, or to the matchmaker's generosity. One general rule of courtship that was not to be broken, under any circumstances, was sex before marriage.¹⁹ Ideally, the couple looking to get married had been expected to wait to find out if they were sexually compatible until after the marriage had taken place. This prompts two important ideas; waiting until after marriage to have sex could result in the couple finding out that they were sexually incompatible, thus putting a strain on the marriage, and it could also be used as a way to unite the couple in marriage by the matchmaker so that they find out that they are incompatible after the marriage and are stuck in a union that benefits both families, rather than themselves. If this is the case with the no sex before marriage rule, it would seem that couples going through the courting process and looking to marry would not have the "alone time" they would need to get to know each other on a personal level. Fortunately, for the young men and women that were working on developing a relationship that would hopefully result in marriage, "alone time" was allotted to

¹⁸ Macfarlane, *Marriage and Love in England 1300-1840*, 293.

¹⁹ Macfarlane, *Marriage and Love in England 1300-1840*, 315.

get to know each other on a personal level to decide if personalities matched or if the union would not be a success.²⁰ However, this alone time was not to be used for sex, but rather for intimate conversation about one's interests and quirks.

Macfarlane also makes an important point about courtship regarding who initiated the conversation or prospect of marriage in the first place. While some may believe that the parents initiated the discussion of marriage between families, Macfarlane states that in England, it was the individuals that were looking to get married that initiated courtship. This statement, however, does not dismiss the fact that some people did try to act as matchmakers when it came to marriage, particularly with the gentry class and nobility class.²¹ In fact, family and friends were the ones who were most likely to suggest a possible suitor to a young man or woman who desired a mate.²² This tells us that instead of courtship being a rigid practice like it is portrayed in popular culture, it was actually more friendly and intimate.

Before examining feminine power in the system of courtship in eighteenth-century Britain, it is important to define masculinity because it can help to understand the different and unequal pressures put on men and women during this period. Masculinity in early modern England meant to keep composure under any circumstance, which meant no crying or showing emotion. This ability to keep composure, according to Bernard Capp, was directly correlated to honor and identity.²³ Because showing emotion could negatively impact honor it can be assumed that men did not or tried not to show emotion during courtship, at least during public appearances. Women, however, were expected to be emotional because "their constitutions, cool and moist, made them more compassionate and more easily moved to both pity and piety."²⁴

²⁰ Macfarlane, *Marriage and Love in England 1300-1840*, 294.

²¹ Macfarlane, *Marriage and Love in England 1300-1840*, 294.

²² Macfarlane, *Marriage and Love in England 1300-1840*, 295.

²³ Bernard Capp, "Jesus Wept but did the Englishman? Masculinity and Emotion in Early Modern England," *Past & Present* 224, no. 1 (2014): 76, doi: 10.1111/j.1468-0424.2011.01639.x.

²⁴ Capp. "Jesus Wept but did the Englishman? Masculinity and Emotion in Early Modern England," 77.

Men admired a woman's ability and susceptibility to convey emotion more publicly, probably because it was not proper for them to convey emotion publicly themselves.²⁵

Another aspect of masculinity is how it directly relates to politeness, as discussed in the previous section on the definition of the gentry class. According to Karen Downing, being polite meant being effeminate, or having characteristics that were perceived to be womanly.²⁶ Clearly, this caused a conflict for men in eighteenth-century England. As discovered, politeness was an integral part of eighteenth-century English society, especially for the gentry class, but politeness was also seen as having feminine characteristics – a double-edged sword for men. Another way politeness could harm a man's masculinity is if he were seen too often with women. During this period, politeness was associated with the presence of women in conversation. In simple terms, if women were present, men were expected to be polite. However, if men were in the company of too many women, he would be seen as effeminate.²⁷ In the eighteenth century, the rising importance of material wealth also began to damage the public's notions of masculinity and how a masculine man should act. In a sense, a man that acquired material wealth purely for the fashion and luxury of it was seen as feminine and this characteristic diminished their manliness.²⁸ In other words, women were supposed to be the ones preoccupied with shopping and luxury, and if a man took interest in this, he was seen as having feminine qualities. Furthermore, Karen Harvey writes that between 1709 and 1750 men who were thought to have feminine traits had homosexual desires.²⁹ This clearly posed an issue for men who were

²⁵ Capp, "Jesus Wept but did the Englishman? Masculinity and Emotion in Early Modern England," 77.

²⁶ Karen Downing, "The Gentleman Boxer: Boxing, Manners, and Masculinity in Eighteenth-Century England," *Men & Masculinities* 12, no. 3 (2010): 333, doi: 10.1177/1097184X08318181.

²⁷ Karen Harvey, "The History of Masculinity, circa 1650-1800," *The Journal of British Studies*, 44, no. 2 (2005): 302.

²⁸ Downing, "The Gentleman Boxer: Boxing, Manners, and Masculinity in Eighteenth-Century England," 331.

²⁹ Karen Harvey, "The History of Masculinity, circa 1650-1800," 300.

heterosexual. If a man were naturally more prone to expressing emotions, he would most likely have been labeled a fop, or vain, self-obsessed man.³⁰

Interestingly, politeness that was associated with effeminacy was changed to chivalry in the late eighteenth century in order to preserve masculinity.³¹ This shift was most likely instated in order to create a more definite line between the male and the female sexes, since politeness was more closely associated with males interacting more often with females, and chivalry is purely associated with what men do for women, rather than with them. Furthermore, chivalry was associated with love, which might seem like an effeminate trait, but was quite the opposite. According to Michele Cohen, chivalry in terms of love was masculine because the man was not only trying to win the woman over in order for her to be with him, but would also be willing to go to war for that woman, thus making chivalrousness a masculine trait, rather than effeminate.³² Therefore, chivalrousness not only showed a man's love, but also a man's willingness to fight.

A man's education also spoke to his manliness. During the early, toward the mid-eighteenth century, as a part of their education men were supposed to complete what was called the "grand tour," which included traveling to France and Italy to learn their manners and polite ways. However, later into the eighteenth century, completing the grand tour was seen as effeminate particularly because of its French influence and the French were seen as particularly effeminate. Therefore, it is no surprise that Kenelm Digby suggested some reforms to the ways that young men in the eighteenth century were educated. Digby suggested that men should emulate the lives and acts of knights, not classical figures like when one thinks of the Greeks or the Romans. Furthermore, Digby believed that "bodily exertion," otherwise known as physical

³⁰ Karen Harvey, "The History of Masculinity, circa 1650-1800," 301.

³¹ Karen Harvey, "The History of Masculinity, circa 1650-1800," 304.

³² Michele Cohen, "Manners Make the Man: Politeness, Chivalry, and the Construction of Masculinity, 1750-1830," *The Journal of British Studies* 44, no. 2 (2005): 320.

activity, along with scholarly studies, could help to make a man more masculine.³³ Vicesimus Knox had additional ideas for reforming the education of young men in order to ensure that they became more masculine. Instead of home-schooling, where he felt coddling of the young men was encouraged, he believed young men should enroll in actual schools because they would then exercise that would increase their bodily strength, while at the same time increasing their intellectuality.³⁴ The fact that even education was entwined in the discussion of masculinity in the eighteenth century indicates that masculinity was a complex subject. While men of the gentry class were expected to get an education, and the grand tour was seen as a primary and important part of education, it is contradictory that it was also seen as detrimental to their masculinity because it promoted politeness and not chivalrousness. Therefore, men were stuck between a rock and a hard place when it came to choosing the route that their education would take. The decision to be home-schooled or to attend a public school also was out of a young man or boy's hands, as the parents would most likely make this decision. While gentry-class families would most likely understand the struggle between masculinity and politeness and masculinity and chivalrousness, this does not mean that the families would choose the path of masculinity and chivalrousness for their son. This poses an important question: If the son did not choose home-schooling and the grand tour for himself, would he still be seen as effeminate and not masculine, or would the fact that it was not his decision rid him of the blame?

In contrast to men's education, women's education was less focused on preparing them for future careers than it was in preparing them for a life of domesticity and becoming a wife. Michele Cohen explains how a woman was not expected to attend formal schooling, stating that "Despite the expansion of various 'seminaries' and establishments for girls' education throughout the century, most educationists, conservative and progressive alike, vigorously

³³ Cohen, "Manners Make the Man: Politeness, Chivalry, and the Construction of Masculinity, 1750-1830," 324.

³⁴ Cohen, "Manners Make the Man: Politeness, Chivalry, and the Construction of Masculinity, 1750-1830," 324.

opposed boarding schools for girls and extolled home education.”³⁵ Home education was pressed for girls and women during this period because it was believed that their focus should be the home, with the man providing for the family financially. Furthermore, sending a girl to boarding school was frowned upon because it did not allow a girl to focus on “moral and social virtues,” but rather allowed them to focus on “external accomplishments.”³⁶ Essentially, homeschooling was very important for a young girl because it was her mother who was supposed to teach her how to act like a proper lady, how to take care of the home, and how to be a proper host. A critique of women’s education, put forth by Wollstonecraft, explains that women’s education lacks proper method, meaning that there was no structure to the education that a woman received.³⁷ Typically, in Britain during the eighteenth century, a girl did not learn Latin by proper instruction like a boy did, but rather by overhearing her male family members learn and speak Latin, which was one of Wollstonecraft’s major complaints; to learn Latin meant having a proper, methodical education.³⁸

As with masculinity, gentry class women had expectations placed on them by society concerning the way they were supposed to act. Conduct is a major component to the ways that women were supposed to act during this period, and many primary sources indicate this. George Savile’s 1688 *The Lady’s New Year’s Gift: or, Advice to a Daughter* outlines how a father believes that his daughter should conduct herself. While Savile acknowledges that a person has a “natural Love of *liberty*,” he states that “You must take it well to be prun’d by so kind a Hand as that of a *Father*,” meaning that a daughter should be grateful that her father is the one controlling

³⁵ Michele Cohen, “Gender and ‘method’ in eighteenth-century English education,” *History of Education* 33, no. 5 (2010): 585, doi: 10.1080/004676004000254550.

³⁶ Cohen, “Gender and ‘method’ in eighteenth-century English education,” 586.

³⁷ Cohen, “Gender and ‘method’ in eighteenth-century English education,” 590.

³⁸ Cohen, “Gender and ‘method’ in eighteenth-century English education,” 591-592.

her actions.³⁹ Savile's words clearly indicate that a woman was not to act in a way as to dishonor her father or family, therefore limiting her own liberty.

Savile not only discusses how a father has control over their daughter, but also discusses what happens once a daughter is out of the home and is finally married within the "Husband" section of his essay. This section is as detailed as the first, explaining that although a woman may be unhappy with the man that her parents chose for her to marry, it is her duty as a wife to support her husband through all endeavors. Savil explains:

You must lay it down for a Foundation in general, That there is *inequality* in the *Sexes*, and that for the better Oeconomy of the World, the *Men*, who were to be the Lawgiveres, had the larger share of the *Reason* bestow'd upon them; by which means your Sex is the better prepar'd for the *Compliance* that is necessary for the better performance of those *Duties* which seem to be most properly assigned to it.⁴⁰

In simpler terms, Savile is explaining that a woman's lack of reason is why she is able to be more compliant with her husband. It is further explained by Savile that a woman's composure is supposed to be gentle and soft, while her husband is taxed with the responsibility of protecting and providing for his wife. Savile, therefore, tries to appeal to the sentiments of women readers by stating that "[They] have more strength in [their] *Looks*, than we have in our *Laws*, and more power by your *Tears*, than we have by our *Arguments*."⁴¹ Women, however, did not have power in marriage, and Savile further advises that women "...are therefore to make the best of what is *settled* by *Law* and *Custom*, and not vainly imagine, that it will be *changed* for your sake."⁴²

³⁹ George Savile, "The Lady's New Year's Gift: or, Advice to a Daughter," in *Women in the Eighteenth Century: Constructions of Femininity*, ed. Vivien Jones (London: Routledge, 1991), 17.

⁴⁰ Savile, "The Lady's New Year's Gift," 18.

⁴¹ Savile, "The Lady's New Year's Gift," 18.

⁴² Savile, "The Lady's New Year's Gift," 19.

Therefore, according to Savile's words, women should have accepted their roles in society and not have expected it to change simply because they wanted it to.

Men, however, were not the only ones to comment on how a woman should act, women wrote about their actions and how they should portray themselves as well. A letter written by Elizabeth Singer Rowe in 1728, compiled in *Letters Moral and Entertaining, Prose and Verse*, is a perfect example of how women thought they should behave within the confines of society. The purpose of this letter, written by Silvia (a fictional character), to Belinda (another fictional character), is to explain why Silvia left for the country on her own accord and not by the influence of someone else. Sylvia details the account of when she met Monsieur le Comte when her brother returned with him from Paris, describing how he "was one of the handsomest and best bred men in the world, and had as much of the *English* gravity as was agreeable to my own temper."⁴³ Although this encounter seems normal, a single woman, attracted to a well-bred gentleman, there was one problem: there was a Madame la Comtesse, who was, according to Sylvia, very kind and tender towards her. Sylvia's feelings toward Comte, mixed with the kindness she received from Comtesse, caused her to feel inexplicably guilty, although she did nothing wrong. Sylvia explained; "I am now reconcil'd to my self, and find an ineffable satisfaction in the silent approbation of my own conduct; a satisfaction superior to all the empty applause of the crowd."⁴⁴ This simply means that Sylvia is glad that she dealt with the situation of her declining conduct herself, rather than expressing it with other people and fixing it that way.

While a woman's conduct was primarily seen as asexual in nature, concerning mostly how she was supposed to be submissive to her husband and other men around her, sexuality was

⁴³ Elizabeth Singer Rowe, "Letters Moral and Entertaining, in Prose and Verse," in *Women in the Eighteenth Century: Constructions of Femininity*, ed. Vivien Jones (London: Routledge, 1991), 23.

⁴⁴ Rowe, "Letters Moral and Entertaining," 25.

not a topic that people of the early modern period did not shy away from. Robert Gould's 1682 poem, *Love Given O'er: Or, a Satyr against the Pride, Lust, and Inconstancy, &c. of Woman* is a great example of how a man viewed a woman practicing her sexuality. The title for Gould's poem itself tells us that he condemns a woman's sexuality, and his use of biblical references throughout the poem tells us that he feels very strongly about the subject matter. Within the first stanza of the poem, Gould's condemnation of women is detected, with the lines; "When *Eve* was form'd; and with her, usher'd in Plagues, Woes, and Death, and a new World of Sin."⁴⁵ Although this line does not mention sexuality in particular, it sets up Gould's strong feelings against women. Beginning at line 129, however, Gould tells at length how a woman being a "whore" and expressing her sexuality will lead her straight into the depths of Hell. Gould wrote; "Sh'enrolled more Females in the List of Whore, Than all the Arts of Man e're did before. Prest with the pond'rous guilt, at length she fell; And through the solid Centre sunk to Hell."⁴⁶ Here, Gould is still referring to the biblical *Eve*, calling her a whore and blaming her for all other women that came after her. Gould also assumes in these lines that *Eve* felt guilty for her actions, which is what prompted her to descend into Hell. It is clear, in this poem, that Gould condemned a woman's sexuality, an assertion that is made even stronger with the use of *Eve* as the main character.

A woman's sexuality was not only condemned, but often misunderstood and determined on her ability to produce children. Written by R. James M.D., in 1743 for *A Medicinal Dictionary*, James relates a woman's sexuality to the definition of hysterics. James wrote;

It is to be observed, that all Women are not equally subject to this Disorder, but that it more particularly seizes Virgins, before their first menstrual Discharge, such as are

⁴⁵ Robert Gould, "Love Given O're: or, a Satyr against the Pride, Lust, and Inconstancy &c. of Woman," in *Women in the Eighteenth Century: Constructions of Femininity*, ed. Vivien Jones (London: Routledge, 1991), 61.

⁴⁶ Gould, "Love Given O're," 63.

marriageable, young Widows, and Wives; especially if they are full of Blood and

Moisture, and have not borne Children: As, also, such as are brought up in Idleness...⁴⁷

Here, James is explaining that young, unmarried women, widows, and wives who have not had children are more susceptible to “hysteria,” in this case meaning sexual desire. James, in relating child bearing to decreasing sexual desire, asserts that the reason that women experience sexual desire is for the ultimate purpose of having babies, rather than seeking their own pleasure. If a woman were to have sex just to seek her own pleasure, this would have been seen as improper. Therefore, as a “cure” to this hysteria that was supposedly experienced by women during the early modern period, James asserts “Reason, Experience, and the Authorities of the greatest Physicians, concur in pronouncing Matrimony highly beneficial in removing hysteric disorders.”⁴⁸

Sex workers, known as prostitutes, in early modern Britain were particularly targeted because of their sexuality. Taken from *An Account of the Rise, Progress, and Present State of the Magdalen Hospital, for the Reception of Penitent Prostitutes. Together with Dr. Dodd's Sermons*, the author wrote; “And indeed were those in that miserable condition, either placed in it by their own choice, or detained in it by their own free-will: had a vicious inclination at first introduced, or did the same vicious inclination continue them in it, amidst repeated opportunities to retrieve and return...”.⁴⁹ Here, the author is clearly acknowledging that some women may have chosen to live the life of a prostitute, but ultimately wants to help them leave the lifestyle that they *chose* to live. The author further wrote that “And it is well known how much harder that case, in this particular, is with the female sex, than with our own. – One false step for ever ruins

⁴⁷ R. James M.D., "A Medicinal Dictionary," in *Women in the Eighteenth Century: Constructions of Femininity*, ed. Vivien Jones (London: Routledge, 1991), 86.

⁴⁸ R. James M.D., "A Medical Dictionary," 86.

⁴⁹ "An Account of the Rise, Progress, and Present State of the Magdalen Hospital, for the reception of Penitent Prostitutes. Together with Dr. Dodd's Sermons," in *Women in the Eighteenth Century: Constructions of Femininity*, ed. Vivien Jones (London: Routledge, 1991), 87.

their fair fame; blasts the fragrance of virgin innocence, and consigns them to contempt and disgrace!”⁵⁰ In this excerpt, it seems as though the male author acknowledges that women, when expressing their sexuality, face harsher criticisms than men and are more likely and quickly to be condemned for their actions. Therefore, it seems as though this sermon is condemning while also advocating for prostitutes. This sermon is an excellent example of how a man felt it was his place to take responsibility for a woman’s expression of sexuality to try and fix their supposed wrongdoings, while men also acknowledged that they had it much easier in this aspect than women.

The writings of women authors themselves also show us how femininity was perceived in the early modern period in Britain. An example of this, to understand what is to be discussed, is within Mary Chudleigh’s 1710 *Essays Upon Several Subjects in Prose and Verse*. In the section titled “To the Reader,” Mary expresses self-doubt about her own writing, indicating that

Tis only to the *Ladies* I presume to present them; I am not so vain as to believe any thing of mine deserves the Notice of the *Men*; but perhaps some of my own Sex may have occasion for such Considerations as these...⁵¹

Although Chudleigh is writing on subjects to help women better themselves, although the particulars are not outlined here, she seems to think lowly of her writing in comparison to a man’s, as if issues concerning the cultivation of a woman’s mind cannot possibly relate to a man. Her bashfulness is further noted when she explained; “I hope they will pardon the Incorrectness of my Stile...it cannot be suppos’d I should understand the Delicacies of Language, the Niceties of good writing; those things I leave to happier, more accurate Pens.”⁵² Chudleigh’s humbleness and bashfulness in this excerpt would have been expected of a woman writing for other women’s

⁵⁰ “An Account of the Rise, Progress, and Present State of the Magdalen Hospital,” 87.

⁵¹ Mary Chudleigh, “Essays Upon Several Subjects in Prose and Verse,” in *Women in the Eighteenth Century: Constructions of Femininity*, ed. Vivien Jones (London: Routledge, 1991), 147.

⁵² Chudleigh, “Essays Upon Several Subjects in Prose and Verse,” 148.

pleasure. To assert too much authority over a subject, especially that of writing would have been seen as out of character and unladylike for a woman of her period.

Eliza Haywood is another example of a woman whose primary purpose was to write for other women. *Lasselia: or, the Self-Abandon'd. A Novel*, written in 1724 by Haywood, includes a section where Haywood discloses her reasoning for producing her novel, addressed 'To the Right Honourable the Earl of Suffolk and Bindon.' Within this section, Haywood apologizes for "[endeavoring] to *divert* more than *improve* the Minds of [her] Readers'," a criticism given to her by women themselves.⁵³ In order to understand this claim, it is important to note that *Lasselia* is about a woman who gives into passion by having an affair with a married man. Although women readers of her novel took her novel the wrong way, Haywood maintains that the purpose of her novel was to "remind the unthinking Part of the World, how dangerous it is to give way to Passion."⁵⁴ Haywood's apology would have been seen as appropriate behavior for the period. If Haywood had not apologized, her writing may not have been as popular as it actually became.

Essentially, men and women of eighteenth-century Britain both had expectations placed on them, but women had expectations placed on their virtue and character, rather than men who had expectations to gain an education, find a career, and be financially stable enough to provide for a future family. It is also important to note that the expectations placed on women were focused on personal characteristics and moral values, rather than the ways that they advance themselves in their career and society. A woman was expected to be pure, polite, and bashful and not expected to attend school or be financially responsible. These expectations placed on women are the forefront of the feminist movement; a woman should be regarded for her intelligence and

⁵³ Eliza Haywood, "Lasselia: or, the Self-Abandon'd. A Novel," in *Women in the Eighteenth Century: Constructions of Femininity*, ed. Vivien Jones (London: Routledge, 1991), 153-154.

⁵⁴ Haywood, "Lasselia," 153.

their equal capabilities to their male counterparts, rather than their ability to remain graceful or lead a pure domestic life.

Feminism in early modern Britain was sparked by women who decided to put their thoughts about the inequalities they faced onto paper. Dubbed as the “first English feminist” by many, Mary Astell wrote *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies: For the Advancement of their True and Greatest Interest* in 1694, advocating for women’s rights. Within her proposal, Astell heavily advocates for women to pursue knowledge, and that their education should be of as much importance as a man’s. Astell writes, “Your *Glass* will not do you half so much service as a serious reflection on your own Minds, which will discover Irregularities more worthy your correction, and keep you from being either too much elated or depress’d by the Representations of the other,” meaning that women should focus more on their education rather than the vanities of the home.⁵⁵ Furthermore, Astell writes, “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 our lives.”⁵⁶ By this statement, Astell asserts that a woman’s lack of education contributes to the hardships that she faced throughout the eighteenth century, thus forming her thesis that a woman’s education is of the most importance.

Another early British feminist writer, who may not be as famed as names like Wollstonecraft or Austen, was Mary Darby Robinson, author of *A Letter to the Women of England on the Injustice of Mental Subordination*. Throughout this text, Robinson aims to detail

⁵⁵ Mary Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies for the Advancement of their Truest and Greatest Interest* (London: Printed for Richard Wilkin, 1697), 6.

⁵⁶ Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies for the Advancement of their Truest and Greatest Interest*, 17-18.

how women are not inferior to men in their mental capabilities, like so many of the time choose to think. For example, Robinson states;

I shall remind my enlightened country-women that they are not the mere appendages of domestic life, but the partners, the equal associates of man: and, where they excel in intellectual powers, they are no less capable of all that prejudice and custom have united in attributing, exclusively, to the thinking faculties of man.⁵⁷

Simply, Robinson means that women are just as capable as men in all aspects of life, including intellectuality. Robinson's writing also details the hypocrisy of the male sex during the early modern period in Britain, discussing how men were able to defend themselves and protect their honor, while if women did so, they would be deemed unfavorable and not marriageable. In a sense, this means that the man held the right to protect his honor, while a woman did not.

Mary Wollstonecraft, author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, had the primary focus of encouraging women to be independent thinkers rather than succumbing to feminine traits, such as the softness of their words. A section of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* that is particularly striking is where Wollstonecraft discusses modesty. Within this chapter, Wollstonecraft discusses modesty particularly pertaining to sexuality. For example, Wollstonecraft states; "...till men are more chaste women will be immodest," meaning that men are allowed to express their sexuality and disregard chastity yet remain modest in the eyes of the public, while women who are not especially chaste are immodest in the eyes of the public.⁵⁸ Wollstonecraft explains how men and women should be held at the same level of modesty in order to make both sexes equal within society.

⁵⁷ Mary Darby Robinson, *A Letter to the Women of England on the Injustice of Mental Subordination with Anecdotes* (London: Printed for T.N. Longman and O.Rees, No.39, Paternoster Row, 1799), 3.

⁵⁸ Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (London: Printed for Walter Scott, n.d.), 176.

It is important to note that while Astell, Robinson, and Wollstonecraft were integral parts to the beginning of the feminist movement and women's rights in Britain, their notions of how women should behave and what women deserve are in direct contrast to the discussion of power in Jane Austen's and Frances Burney's novels. While the three women discussed in this section were advocates for immediate and apparent change in the way that women were treated and how women conducted themselves, Austen and Burney are advocates for a more subtle change. Austen and Burney, while they are noted to be feminist writers, shared a less radical view of change and thus were more celebrated as authors. Within each of their respective novels, you can find aspects of feminine power, such as the feminine power that resided in motherhood, complacency, as well as expressing emotion and courage. While the women within these novels did not fight for equality and improvements within their sex in a more fervent way, their actions in persuading the events and people around them show a contrasting form of feminine power to the ideals of Astell, Robinson, and Wollstonecraft.

To authors such as Austen and Burney, marriage was a very important topic and it is at the forefront of most of their novels. For these eighteenth-century writers, marriage was a tool in gaining her own domestic sphere. Furthermore, whom she married would dictate her status in society, which could also give her certain levels of freedom. Amanda Vickery describes how women viewed acquiring her own space as a source of power, specifically using Austen's novel *Northanger Abbey*. Catherine Morland, a main character in *Northanger Abbey*, has a marriage prospect of Henry Tilney, a wealthy gentry class man with a large estate. Vickery explains that "All eyes are on young Catherine to gauge her reactions to the 'new-built substantial stone house, with its semi circular sweep and green gates' ...but it is the charming drawing room, with

French windows overlooking the meadows, still awaiting decoration, positively inviting a woman's touch, that clinches the deal".⁵⁹

The fact that Catherine would be able to have control over this room in the house substantiates the importance of having power within the domestic sphere for a woman. Vickery further emphasizes the importance of having power within the domestic sphere within her analysis of Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*. Here, Vickery describes how Mrs. Dashwood's move into Barton Cottage, away from her previous estate where she was in power after her husband's death and her son's acquirement of the household, was a blow to her sense of power and independence. To combat the loss she felt, Mrs. Dashwood states that "The parlours are both too small' for the domestic sociability that a house of ladies ideally generated, but Mrs. Dashwood will not be dictated to by mere walls." She further explains how she will make improvements to the house to make it more suitable for her and her daughters.⁶⁰ Although this example does not explain how a woman looked for power within the domestic sphere by marrying a suitable man, it does explain how a woman would react when being displaced from her place of power and being put into a "lesser" situation, especially after her husband dies. Most likely, she would still try to regain her sense of independence by making the new home her own, but the loss is still felt in her decline of status.

A theory about a particular point in Austen's life, written by Caroline Austen, her niece, talks about a proposal that possibly took place between Austen and a man six years her junior, named Harris Bigg-Wither. Caroline writes in a letter to her niece named Amy;

I can give, I believe the *exact* date of Mr Wither's proposal to my Aunt from some entries in an old pocket book which make *no* allusion to anything of the sort-but some peculiar

⁵⁹ Amanda Vickery, *Behind Closed Doors: At Home in Georgian England* (London: Yale University Press, 2009), 83.

⁶⁰ Vickery, *Behind Closed Doors: At Home in Georgian England*, 85.

comings & goings coinciding exactly with what my Mother more than once told me of *that* affair, leave me in no doubt that the offer was made, & accepted at Manydown on Thursday the 2d of Dec – 1802 & *refused* the next morning, Friday, Dec. 3d...⁶¹

Within the article that this letter is a part of, Joan Austen-Leigh, a descendant of the Austen family, speculates that the reason for Austen even considering marrying Mr. Withers is because of the large estate at Manydown that he was supposed to inherit once his father passed away.⁶² It is unknown, however, as to why Austen did not go through with the marriage, but this is a perfect example of why marriage was so important even to the life of a real person like Austen – money talked.

Many novels written during the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century in Britain touch greatly upon the power that a mother holds over her family, and especially her female children. This maternal power, of course, was defined by a culture of domesticity for women during the eighteenth century.⁶³ Therefore, the only true way for an older, married woman to have power within her home was to have children, as she would be their sole caregiver and decision maker. Austen's novel, *Pride and Prejudice*, gives a perfect example of how a mother in eighteenth-century Britain was heavily involved in the lives of her daughters, manipulating their life choices to suit the family's needs, as the first chapter of the novel illustrates. Within the first chapter, Mrs. Bennett, Jane and Elizabeth's mother, discusses Mr. Bingley, a wealthy single man that is to visit their neighborhood from Netherfield Park with her husband, Mr. Bennett. Here, Mrs. Bennett urges her husband to meet Mr. Bingley because she believes that he "MAY fall in love with one of them."⁶⁴ Mrs. Bennett's ability to persuade her

⁶¹ Joan Austen-Leigh, "New Light Thrown on JA's Refusal of Harris Bigg-Wither," *Journal of the Jane Austen Society of America* no. 8 (1986): 36, ISSN: 0821-0314.

⁶² Austen-Leigh, "New Light Thrown on JA's Refusal of Harris Bigg-Wither, 34-36.

⁶³ Marilyn Francus, *Monstrous Motherhood: 18th-Century Culture and the Ideology of Domesticity* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), 1.

⁶⁴ Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (Boston: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1918), 2.

husband into meeting Mr. Bingley for the sake of her daughters' chances at marriage shows how gentry class women in eighteenth-century Britain used their motherhood and culture of domesticity to their advantage.

Another example of feminine power in motherhood is in another novel by Austen, titled *Sense and Sensibility*. The mother figure in this novel, however, does not possess daughters like in *Pride and Prejudice*, but rather advocates for her son against the daughters of Mrs. Dashwood. Fanny, the wife of Mr. John Dashwood and son of the late Mr. Dashwood, was upset at the fact that her husband was charged with leaving an inheritance to each of his stepsisters upon the request of his father at his deathbed. To dissuade her husband from giving his stepsisters such a large sum, Fanny used her love for her son and her feminine appeal. For example, Austen writes; "To take three thousand pounds from the fortune of their dear little boy would be impoverishing him to the most dreadful degree," which clearly depicts her disdain for her sister-in-laws but also her concern for her child's well-being.⁶⁵ It took very little time for Fanny's persuasion tactic to work on her husband, and he readily agreed to lessen the dowries given to his stepsisters.

Lady Susan, another novel by Austen, is written as a collection of letters, rather than a normal chapter novel. This novel is another prime example of feminine power in motherhood because Lady Susan acts as a matchmaker for her daughter Frederica. On top of her hope to match her daughter with an eligible suitor, Lady Susan is perceived as a harsh and unloving mother through the majority of the novel. For example, in a letter from Lady Susan to Mrs. Johnson, she writes of her daughter; "And by-the-by, you had better not invite her any more on that account, as I wish her to find her situation as unpleasant as possible."⁶⁶ This letter, written to Mrs. Johnson, details that Lady Johnson is sending her daughter to school, and does not want her participating in any outside activities, which makes it seem like Lady Susan enjoys making her

⁶⁵ Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* (London: Collins Clear-Type Press, 1953), 21.

⁶⁶ Jane Austen, *Lady Susan* (South Australia: University of Adelaide, 2015), Letter VII.

daughter's life miserable. However, as the letter continues, it becomes clear that Lady Susan is attempting to make her daughter's life miserable because she wants her focus to shift to being married, rather than staying single and rejecting a man that Lady Susan views as perfectly suitable for marriage. Lady Susan further instructs Mrs. Johnson to make sure that Sir James, Frederica's potential husband, does not find any other women that he may marry. In the last lines of this letter to Mrs. Johnson, Lady Susan explains the "valid" reasons for her behavior, stating that she did not want to force her daughter into marriage with Sir James, but rather make it *seem* like it was her own decision. As Lady Susan explains; "instead of adopting so harsh a measure, merely propose to make it her own choice, by rendering her thoroughly uncomfortable till she does accept him."⁶⁷ Lady Susan's actions depict how a mother could use her matchmaking skills and those around her to exert power over her children, specifically daughters. Influencing who daughters married not only allowed a mother to control her children, it also allowed her to control the direction the family climbed in the social ladder, which is certainly a masterful use of femininity.

Another indicator of feminine power lies with how some women outwardly seemed content in their situation, while inside they suffered turmoil. An example of this can be seen in Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*. This novel details the courtships of the Dashwood sisters, specifically Elinor and Marianne, while the youngest sister Margaret does not play a large roll within the novel. Within *Sense and Sensibility*, Elinor hides her emotions from those around her regarding Edward Ferrars, a man she secretly hopes to marry. An example of Elinor's temperament is summed up in this sentence written by Austen; "She had an excellent heart; -- her disposition was affectionate, and her feelings were strong; but she knew how to govern them: it was knowledge which her mother had yet to learn; and which one of her sisters had resolved

⁶⁷ Austen, *Lady Susan*, Letter VII.

never to be taught.”⁶⁸ This other sister, mentioned by Austen, is Marianne, whose temperament is not as resolved as Elinor’s. It might seem strange that a woman’s ability to “govern” her emotions, as Austen states, is a form of feminine power. However, Elinor’s strength in resolve allows her to not reveal her feelings to the men she so highly sought, such as Ferrars, which gives her a distinct advantage in the chance of rejection.

In chapter four of *Sense and Sensibility*, Elinor and Marianne discuss Edward, and Elinor is tricked by her sister into defending Edward against her sister’s scrutiny. As Austen states, after Marianne decrees that she should soon find him “handsome,” “Elinor started at this declaration, and was sorry for the warmth she had been betrayed into in speaking of him. She felt Edward stood very high in her opinion.”⁶⁹ Austen further describes how Elinor felt that the feelings between Edward and herself were mutual, but that she needed to be more certain before she confessed her love for him. Again, the restraint that Elinor practices in her feelings for Edward allow her to control the way she is perceived by her family as well as Edward himself. If Elinor outwardly expressed her feelings instead of keeping them to herself, it would be fair to assume that Edward would have taken advantage of what he knew and immediately expressed proposal.

Mansfield Park is another novel that deserves attention for having a woman that mostly keeps her feelings to herself, allowing her to have some sort of control in her life. In contrast to Elinor in *Sense and Sensibility*, however, Fanny Price was placed in an unfortunate situation where her mother could no longer take care of her and was then thrust into the home of her relatives, the Betrams, who were much more wealthy and had children of their own. As the novel progresses and details Fanny’s life with the Betrams, she becomes increasingly content with her station in life as a person of a lower status, although she is technically related to the family members she lived with. Lady Betrams daughters, Maria and Julia, were unkind to Fanny the

⁶⁸ Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*, 20.

⁶⁹ Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*, 32.

majority of the time, and although “Fanny was often mortified by their treatment of her, she thought too lowly of her claims to be injured by it.”⁷⁰ Fanny’s ability to stay calm in the face of her cousin’s ridicule is a form of power because it does not allow Fanny’s cousins to assume power over her. If Fanny acted as if their ridicule bothered her, she might face harsher ridicule and it might damage her self-esteem even more. As Fanny grew older, her acceptance of her station in life helped her mold into the family better, eventually allowing her to be revered by her wealthy family members rather than detested.

Evelina, a novel written by Frances Burney, a contemporary of Jane Austen, is very similar to *Mansfield Park* in the sense that a young woman is sent to live with people that are not her own parents. In contrast, to *Mansfield Park*, however, *Evelina* details the story of a young woman who is financially “well off” and does not have the same struggles and ridicule as Fanny Price does, because Evelina is an admired young woman. When Evelina arrives in London, she is immediately introduced to society with Mrs. Mirvan by attending a multitude of outings and parties. At the first party Evelina attended, she met Lord Orville, a man whom she became immediately infatuated with. At the second party, however, a man only known as the Captain approached Evelina. This man, in contrast to Lord Orville, was brash and aggressive with Evelina, especially when she refused to dance with him. After a discussion between Lord Orville, the Captain, Mrs. Mirvan, and Evelina, Evelina expresses her disgust with the Captain and bursts into tears. This allows for Mrs. Mirvan to feel sympathy for Evelina and for the Captain to finally understand that Evelina has no feelings for him.⁷¹ This instance demonstrates how a woman could be vocal about who she did not want to pursue a relationship through outright defiance, as well as through expressing emotion.

⁷⁰ Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park* (London: Collins Clear-Type Press, 1953), 34.

⁷¹ Frances Burney, *Evelina* (Boston: Bedford Books, 1997), Letter XIII.

An instance within Burney's own life that can be read within her letters and journals parallels with the story of *Evelina*, a young girl being pursued by a man she had no feelings for. Unlike *Evelina*, however, Burney was well cultured and knew how to navigate the social sphere, although it is not surprising that she gave *Evelina* these characteristics, because one can only assume that she may have felt that way about herself. A diary entry, dated May 8th, 1775, details the night that Burney met Thomas Barlow at Mrs. O'Connor's party, an old acquaintance of her grandmother. Like *Evelina*, Burney was relentlessly pursued by Barlow, and at the end of the party as Burney was leaving, she writes, "He earnestly entreated me to stay one or two minutes. I did not, however, think such compliance at all requisite, and therefore only offered to set my grandmother down in my way." She then writes how Mrs. O'Connor extended an invitation to a party the following week, and how Barlow pressed her to go. Four days after meeting Barlow, Burney received a letter where he expressed great interest in her. Barlow wrote;

...that the Affability, Sweetness, and Sensibility, which shone in your every Action, lead me irresistibly to Love and Admire the Mistress of them...I hope to hear you are well, and that you will honour us with your Company...I am persuaded we are honoured with your Assent to the Engagement.⁷²

Barlow then ends the letter calling himself "Fanny's Most sincere Admirer."⁷³

Austen's own life correlates with one of her own characters in her novel *Sense and Sensibility*. Within this novel, Marianne, in contrast to her sister Elinor as described above, expresses emotion freely in accordance with her love for John Willoughby and her hopes to marry him. Marianne, however, is left visibly heartbroken when Willoughby leaves her for a wealthier woman. Austen's letters describe a similar situation, where the love of her life leaves

⁷² Frances Burney, *The Early Diary of Frances Burney 1768-1778*, ed. Annie Raine Ellis (London: George Bell and Sons, 1889), 49-50.

⁷³ Frances Burney, *The Early Diary of Frances Burney 1768-1778*, 50.

her, but for an unknown reason to the reader, leaving her heartbroken. Within her letter, written on January 15, Austen writes; “*Friday*. – At length the Day is come on which I am to flirt my last with Tom Lefroy, & when you receive this it will be over – My tears flow as I write, at the melancholy idea.”⁷⁴ Here, like her fictional character Marianne, Austen was an emotional wreck after being left by a man she intended to marry. This example shows how Austen used her own life and experiences to influence her novels and her characters.

Aphra Behn, an author in the late seventeenth century in Britain, wrote a well-received play titled *The Forced Marriage: Or, the Jealous Bridegroom*, which deals with two women, Princess Galatea, who is being forced to marry Prince Philander, her social equal, and Erminia, who is not a princess, and is being forced to marry General Alcippus. Although these matches are perfect for the families’ statuses, both girls want to marry the opposite person out of their social sphere. For instance, this means that Erminia wants to marry Prince Philander, while Princess Galatea would prefer to marry General Alcippus. Of course, this is not well received by either of the girls’ families. In the opening of scene three, Erminia discusses her impending marriage to General Alcippus with her father, expressing her feelings of friendship toward him, rather than love. Erminia states;

I humbly thank you, Sir, though't be too late, And wish you yet would try to change my fate; What to *Alcippus* you did love believe,
Was such a friendship as might well deceive; 'Twas what kind Sisters do to Brothers pay;
Alcippus I can love no other way.
Sir, lay the interest of a Father by, And give me leave this *Lover* to deny.⁷⁵

Here, Erminia is directly responding to her father’s sentiment that marrying General Alcippus would bring great fortune to the family and that he thought she would be able to love him. Behn choosing to give Erminia the ability to speak boldly with her father attests to the fact that within

⁷⁴ Jane Austen, *Jane Austen’s Letters*, ed. Deirdre Le Faye (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 4.

⁷⁵ Aphra Behn, *The Complete Works of Aphra Behn*, ed. Delphi Classics (East Sussex: Delphi Publishing Ltd, 2016), Act I, Scene III.

the eighteenth and early nineteenth century being courageous and expressing emotion was a feminine power.

Through the thorough examination of these primary sources, it is clear that feminist authors during the eighteenth century such as Austen, Burney, and Behn gave women subtle, yet noticeable feminine powers, advocating for their sex and their desire to have control over their own lives. These authors showed a variety of forms of power, including the power in motherhood, the power in resilience and being reserved, as well as the power in showing emotion. These novelists and playwright differed in views of feminine power in comparison to their contemporaries, Wollstonecraft, Astell, and Robinson, in that they offered more socially acceptable means of gaining control over their own lives, especially throughout the common theme of marriage. Wollstonecraft and the other women that join her in her sentiments, however, view feminine power as being much more assertive and direct. They believed in advocating for a woman's right to education as well as women not having to marry in order to gain some "freedom" – a term used loosely when talking about this period and subject.

The topic of discussion, the power of femininity in the eighteenth century in Britain, specifically the subtle and more socially accepted power discussed by Austen, Burney, and Behn, can be explained by the complex mechanisms of society at this time. The gentry class, in contrast to the elite class, had more social flexibility, especially concerning marriage. Within the elite class, marriage was essentially non-negotiable as the intent of marriage was to keep the family name in high status. The gentry class, as discussed, was comprised of lesser land owning families, which had a variety of occupations such as lawyers, doctors, and various other positions that would allow for a decent income but nothing comparable to the nobles and lords of the elite classes. This, of course, allowed women to marry someone that would keep their family's status within society and give them more suitors to choose from. With this flexibility, gentry class

women could exercise feminine power by having a say in who they married, picking from eligible bachelors that equated to their social status and desires, which is very evident in Vickery's discussion of Robert and Elizabeth Parker. This does not mean, however, that families did not have the final say in their daughter's marriage. Again, as Richardson wrote, "Is it, that they will not speak out, lest, if their wishes should not be crowned with success by *one* man, they should deprive themselves of the chance to succeed with *another*?"⁷⁶

It is important to also remember that women of the gentry class during the eighteenth century in Britain had to express feminine power particularly in regards to courtship and motherhood because they did not have easy access to education. In gentry society, it was the men of the family that were being sent to school to become more eligible bachelors, and the women of the family who were to be matched up with these educated bachelors. Education was regarded as an important aspect in increasing one's social mobility but also in finding a career and gaining wealth, such as becoming a doctor, lawyer, or even a merchant. Thus, it was important for men to acquire an education so that he could lead a lifestyle that would be attractive to a future wife. Acquiring a lifestyle that seemed attractive to a future wife did not always require an education, however; an inheritance could also allow for an attractive, sizeable income and property. This is evident in the case of Austen's personal life, when she met Harris Bigg-Wither who was about to inherit Manydown Park, a large estate being left to him by his father. This estate was appealing to Austen because it could have become her domain, but ultimately it was not enough for Bigg-Wither to secure a marriage with Austen.

Ultimately, through the lens of Austen, Burney, and Behn, it is evident that these women believed that feminine power relied in manipulating the system of marriage and courtship in any way they could, whether that was portrayed through their fictional characters or actual lives. For

⁷⁶ Hill, *Eighteenth Century Women: An Anthology* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1984), 77.

Austen's personal life, even a man inheriting a large estate was not enough for her to marry him, and Burney did not appreciate the advances of a respectable man by the name of Barlow. The stories of each of these author's fictional characters allow for the reader to understand that a woman's femininity could be the one thing she had control over in a patriarchal society, whether that was by having control over the domestic sphere and her children, controlling her emotions in order to not allow other people to know how she truly felt, and, on the contrary, expressing emotion freely in order to persuade those around her, especially males. For these women, the underlying message of their writing is subtle, yet powerful; women should advocate for themselves whenever possible, even if it had to be done through the patriarchal system of marriage and courtship.

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