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COURTING DISASTER:
WOMEN, ROMANCE, AND NOVELS IN EIGHTEENTH AND NINETEENTH
CENTURY BRITAIN

An Honors Thesis Submitted to
The Faculty of the Department of History
In Candidacy for an Honors Degree in History

Department of History

By

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Abstract

Society always fears that something is corrupting its youth and therefore dooming the future. In the late eighteenth century, British High Society believed that the sentimental and overly dramatic courtship novel was adversely affecting the actions of marriageable young women. In response to these fears, women writers of the early nineteenth century produced literature designed to guide young women safely and happily through the steps of courtship and marriage. The impact of British society's changing views on courtship and marriage combined with the fears raised by the courtship novel in the minds of older society transformed the courtship novel of the late eighteenth century into the didactic novel and marital advice books of the early nineteenth century. The primary aim of the didactic novel was to impress upon their readers the importance of education and logic for women without entirely destroying the romantic notions of the courtship genre while the aim of the marital advice books was to provide a more accurate description of marriage.

Society always fears that something is corrupting its youth and therefore dooming the future. The current fear focuses on television and film and the belief that portrayed violence is corrupting today's youth. Before television and the film industry, books appeared to hold the same hypnotic power over the minds of teenagers and children. Just as violent television shows are blamed for a rise in violence carried out by youths, two centuries ago it was believed that romantic courtship novels affected the actions of the marriageable young women in Great Britain. From the middle of the eighteenth century to the middle of the nineteenth century, courtship novels influenced and were influenced by British society's changing views on courtship and marriage. This dual impact transformed the sentimental courtship novel of the late eighteenth century into the didactic novel and marital advice books of the early nineteenth century.

Specifically, women reading courtship novels imbued with romantic notions believed them to be an accurate representation of courtship, marriage, and men, and therefore expected their own courtships to be overly dramatic and their resulting marriages overly romantic. These higher and quite frankly somewhat unrealistic expectations held by those entering courtship and marriage caused higher rates of disappointment in marriage and a subsequent rise in unsatisfying marriages as seen in the increase in separations and divorces. This, and perhaps more importantly the fear of this occurring, caused novelists to begin over dramatizing the actions of the heroine in their courtship novels in an effort to show their readers how ridiculous and indeed even damaging belief in the reality of the romantic genre could be to women and their lives. This almost self mocking tone of the later courtship novel allowed it to be transformed into the didactic novel whose aim included impressing upon their readers the importance

of education and logic for women without entirely destroying the romantic notions of the courtship genre. The didactic novel, however, only fixed part of the problem, that of unrealistic expectations. The marital advice book of the mid-nineteenth century solved the rest of the problem by providing young unmarried women with solid advice on marriage, what to expect, and how to react in various situations.

Katherine Green defines the courtship novel as a novel in which “women, no longer merely unwilling victims, became heroines with significant, though modest, prerogatives of choice and action.”¹ For the purpose of this paper, this definition has been expanded to include novels in which women, victims or not, are involved in the process of courtship. This includes works of literature referred to elsewhere as seduction novels, romantic novels, sentimental novels, English novels, and occasionally ventures into the realm of the gothic novel. It has also been limited to novels written by women during the later half of the eighteenth century in Great Britain. Janet Todd sums up the typical novel by saying:

Its dialogue is bombastic and theatrical and its descriptions hyperbolic and adjectival. ‘Esteem’ is inevitably qualified by ‘sincere’ and ‘friendship’ with ‘tender.’... Meetings are wet with tears and cheeks are flushed. The Technicolor emotional moments are rendered in the conventional sentimental vocabulary, helped by an array of interrupted sentences, italics, dashes and exclamation marks, which are spattered over the pages and which aim to convey the wordless feeling the sentimental novel so much prized.²

¹ Katherine Sobba Green, *The Courtship Novel, 1740-1820: A Feminized Genre* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1991), 2.

² Janet Todd, *The Sign of Angelica: Women, Writing and Fiction, 1669-1800* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 183-184.

In short, the novels are marked by sentimental passages that today would be viewed as being overly dramatic and far too long to remain serious. Additionally, the endings can be easily split into two categories: the virtuous and sentimental heroine tragically dies or she is rewarded for her virtue materially and usually additionally in matrimony.³ In either case, the modern day reader finishes the book with a combination feeling of relief in his or her survival for having made it safely through the deluge of dramatics and thankfulness that the saga wasn't longer.

Any piece of work that attempts to deal with family life during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in England has to consider the works of Lawrence Stone. In his study, *Family, Sex, and Marriage in England, 1500 – 1800*, Stone placed the reasons for marriage into four categories as defined by motives. The first motive was based on economic and social advancement considerations; the resulting marriage was more of a business contract between two families than anything else regarding the married couple. Marriages such as this were becoming increasingly uncommon by the mid-eighteenth century due to a combination of factors, one of which was the growing prevalence of affection between parents and children.

The second motive, which was increasingly replacing the first motive, was a direct effect of the positive relationships between parents and children. Marriages prompted by this motive were based on friendship and mutual esteem formed through a long courtship during which each partner gained extensive knowledge of the other's

³ Todd, 185.

“moral, intellectual and psychological qualities.”⁴ After this lengthy courtship, “a well-balanced and calculated assessment of the chances of long-term compatibility” could be formed and, if the assessment were favorable, an engagement entered into.⁵ It was believed that marriages based upon affection and friendship that had held up and grown through the long getting-acquainted period that was courtship would be better able to last and remain friendly as the partners had a better idea of who they were as well as who their partner was prior to entering marriage.

The third motive was purely physical; generally, however, this was not believed to be a force that would compel someone to marry as it could be and often was satisfied outside of the bonds of matrimony, albeit with sometimes scandalous results.⁶ Apparently, few marriages were formed operating under this third motive.

The fourth and final motive was based on the ideas of fictional romantic love. Stone scathingly describes it as being “a disturbance in the mental equilibrium resulting in an obsessive concentration upon the virtues of another person, a blindness to all his or her possible defects, and a rejection of all other options or considerations, especially such mundane matters as money.”⁷ Although a love that was so powerful as to be able to disregard all obstacles standing in the way of marital bliss might be seen as highly romantic and moving in a novel or on the stage, its staying power was rightfully doubted. Indeed, Stone points out, “Almost everyone agreed, however, that both physical desire and romantic love were unsafe bases for an enduring marriage, since both were violent

⁴ Lawrence Stone, *Family, Sex, and Marriage in England, 1500 – 1800* (New York : Harper & Row, Publishers, 1977), 271.

⁵ Stone, *Family, Sex, and Marriage*, 271.

⁶ Stone, *Family, Sex, and Marriage*, 271-272.

⁷ Stone, *Family, Sex, and Marriage*, 272.

mental disturbances which would inevitably be of only short duration.”⁸ Despite this agreement, Stone argues that the rise in separation and divorce rates indicates that there was a similar increase in marriages based on emotions rather than by arrangement. He observes, “There can be little doubt that the rising expectations at that time of what marriage involved in terms of personal commitment more frequently led to disappointment, resulting in more frequent marital breakdowns.”⁹ Marriages based upon emotions, which may be fleeting, were more likely to be entered into with higher expectations of happiness. When the infatuation passed and/or the expectations of marital bliss proved inaccurate, the romantic couple had a longer way to fall than the previous generations who entered marriages seen as contracts between families rather than a union of two people in love. The arranged couple, who were not in love with each other, had lower expectations of marital bliss and when they failed to find such happiness, they remained married as the reasons that joined them in marriage originally – desire for status, wealth, and family considerations – remained in force. Additionally, these previous marriages, which were often arranged by the couples’ parents, remained under pressure by the arranging families to remain married regardless of the emotional feelings of the couple involved.

Regardless of the reasons for marriage, the main goal of most single women remained marriage even though they saw the decision of whom to marry as a terrifying and life changing decision. Often, they saw it as the biggest decision they would make in their entire lives and in that they were correct. Their choice of husbands would direct the

⁸ Stone, *Family, Sex, and Marriage*, 272.

⁹ Lawrence Stone, *Broken Lives: Separation and Divorce in England, 1660-1857* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 15.

rest of their lives and would affect their future happiness and well-being. A perfect example of this is found in Miss Elizabeth Parker, who was married twice in the second half of the eighteenth century. Her first marriage in 1751 at age 24 to Robert Parker, which ended in the untimely death of her husband, was, by all accounts, quite pleasant. Mr. Parker saw her as his partner and remained sensitive to her interests and beliefs.¹⁰ Her second choice of husbands, seven years after the death of her first husband, was disapproved of by her family and not nearly as fortunate for herself. Although her diary during the first seven years of her marriage to John Shackleton, a man almost twenty years her junior, gives no hint of marital strife, the diary continues through to her death, revealing the last nine years of her marriage to be exceedingly unhappy. According to Elizabeth, John's drinking grew uncontrollable and he began to abuse her, even whipping her with a horsewhip.¹¹ The contrasting outcomes of Miss Parker's marriages to vastly different husbands throws into sharp relief the importance of picking the right man to wed, especially when one takes into consideration that a married couple was considered bound for life and, once wed, it was extremely difficult to obtain a divorce.

Under British law, a man and his wife were one individual and that individual was the husband. Divorce was not as likely an option as it is now and was obtained, in aristocratic marriages, only through an act of Parliament; as Vickery states, "between 1670 and 1857 there were only 325 divorces in England, all but four of these obtained by

¹⁰Amanda Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter: Women's Lives in Georgian England* (London: Yale University Press, 1998), 65.

¹¹ Vickery, 73-74.

men.”¹² In a hundred and eighty-seven years, only four women successfully obtained a divorce.

Another option open to unhappily married elite couples of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was legal separation. However, “the deterrents to a wife suing for separation were so severe that few would choose to go through such an experience unless driven by desperation.”¹³ If the husband was found guilty, the court could and would award alimony to the wife, although there was no way for the court to then enforce the payments.¹⁴ Additionally, even after separation, the husband retained the right to seize any and all income the wife made in order to support herself as well as possess any property she inherited.¹⁵ Perhaps even more detrimental, the husband would, more often than not, retain full custody and absolute control over any children the couple had; only late in the eighteenth century did this begin to change as the Court of Chancery began to grant custody of small children to wives.¹⁶ Finally, separations, granted only for “gross physical cruelty or adultery” of which “all the sordid details both of the sufferings of a battered wife and of the promiscuous sexual activities of an unfaithful husband had to be displayed in open court,” were extremely well publicized among the elite, a relatively small group of individuals.¹⁷ The horror of exposing intimate details before all of society and the scandal that would result worked as a powerful deterrent to seeking a legal

¹² Vickery, 73.

¹³ Stone, *Broken Lives*, 13.

¹⁴ Stone, *Broken Lives*, 13.

¹⁵ Stone, *Broken Lives*, 13.

¹⁶ Stone, *Broken Lives*, 14.

¹⁷ Stone, *Broken Lives*, 14.

separation. Due to these issues with separation and divorce, the prevailing belief remained that marriage was for the rest of the woman's life and would end only upon the death of either herself or her husband.

With this in mind, a woman's decision to marry and who she decided to marry was extremely important to her future well-being. The fear that the importance of this decision evoked in single women was amplified by the increase in perceived power over their personal lives: during courtship, the woman was seemingly the one in the position of power in the relationship. The control over this decision was still somewhat limited by parental concern. Even though it was becoming increasingly the norm for the couple in question to make the decision regarding who they would marry, to some degree, arranged marriages still occurred. Rather than parents merely ordering their children to marry someone, mothers and fathers influenced their children's decisions via the bonds of affections that existed between parents and children, a form of emotional blackmail. A brilliant example of this is found in Edward Gibbon's autobiography when he recorded his response to being "obliged by his family to break off the one and only attachment to a woman ever formed in his life: 'I sighed as a lover; I obeyed as a son.'"¹⁸ Stone comments, "Beneath the stately prose there wells up some of the bitterness generated by this conflict of values over mating arrangements between parents and children."¹⁹ Although a woman's father could compel her into marriage, by the middle of the eighteenth century this was becoming increasingly infrequent. Generally, the father's power lay in forbidding a marriage he saw as unsuitable rather than pushing forward a bridegroom he saw as ideal for his daughter.

¹⁸ Stone, *Family, Sex, and Marriage*, 320.

¹⁹ Stone, *Family, Sex, and Marriage*, 320.

While the level of power an unmarried woman held was questionable, it was nonetheless true that, often for the first time in her sheltered life, she had the right to make her own life changing decision. The unmarried woman, therefore, could encourage or discourage her suitors as she saw fit although she would have to be careful to stay within the bounds of her father's approval. This meant that she was in the greatest position of power she had ever had and most likely would ever have again. She could dictate, after taking into consideration society's rules, how far her beau could go and what she considered acceptable. Returning to Elizabeth Parker as an example, she strung her future first husband along, first encouraging him and then denying him, for seven years before finally consenting to marry him.²⁰ An unmarried woman held a certain amount of power over the man who was hoping to make her his wife as she had to be pleased in order for her to accept his offer of marriage.

Knowing the importance of this decision and fearful of their ability to make such a choice over their own lives, women looked for guidance. Advice from mothers and trusted friends and family was undoubtedly sought. So were books and pamphlets published by fathers, mothers, and ministers providing stern advice to these young women such as *Instructions for a Young Lady in Every Sphere and Period of Life* published in 1773 and *The Polite Lady; or a Course of Female Education in a Series of Letters from a Mother to Her Daughter* published sometime before 1769.

Instructions for a Young Lady, written by Lady Sarah Pennington, is a selection of letters to young ladies. The first of the letters is from an "unfortunate Mother" to her daughter; she instructs her daughter to always take "the public voice" (i.e., that of

²⁰ Vickery, 45.

society) into account prior to taking any sort of action.²¹ Another letter is from Dean Smith to a young lady of his acquaintance upon her (arranged) marriage. His letter was included in this work because it, as Lady Pennington puts it, “abounds with so much good sense and knowledge of mankind, as must render it of general advantage to the whole sex, if attentively perused.”²² This good sense of Mr. Smith boils down to a married woman keeping her passions under check while in public, which includes in the presence of anyone other than her husband alone, and to behave, if possible, even more modestly and reservedly than she did prior to marriage. It is not readily apparent what the newly wed young lady is allowed to do as the entire letter is a list of don’ts or advocating further reservation in all interactions with other people.

The Polite Lady, written as a series of undated letters between a mother, Portia, and her teenage daughter, Sophia, who is first away at boarding school and then living in London with her aunt and female cousins, constantly reinforces the idea that children should look to their parents for advice in every aspect of their life. In one letter, Sophia writes that she has held herself apart from the other young ladies at school although she confesses that “there are three or four of them for whom I have a particular esteem” but that she “will not enter into a strict friendship” until she received her mother’s advice on whom to befriend.²³ Her mother’s response opens by saying:

How shall I express the joy I received from the perusal of your last letter ! how [sic] happy am I in having a daughter who, at an age, when most young ladies imagine they can think and act for themselves, is so humble and dutiful, as to

²¹ *Instructions for a Young Lady in Every Sphere and Period of Life* (Edinburgh: A. Donaldson, 1773), 1, 2.

²² *Instructions for a Young Lady*, 205.

²³ *The Polite Lady; or a Course of Female Education In a Series of Letters from a Mother to Her Daughter*, 2nd ed. (London: Newberry & Carman, 1769), 38. Spellings have been modernized.

undertake nothing without the permission and advice of her mother.²⁴

Sophia replies by confirming that she “will never venture to do any thing of importance, without first hearing your opinion” which she hopes her mother “will continue to give me with your usual humanity and condescension.”²⁵ Granted, the advice that follows this praise and continues on for several long letters paints a picture of the ideal friend and can be considered good advice but the point is that the mother is effusively praising her daughter for consulting her prior to even entering into a friendship with a fellow boarding school mate. Worryingly, she is effectively praising her daughter for failing to think for herself. How then were young women, who were trained not to think or act upon their own will, expected to make life changing decisions later on? What is perhaps even more interesting is that in the entire book, although the advice ranged from how to carry oneself and what to wear to the virtues of chastity, modesty, and charity, there were no instructions on what Sophia should look for in a husband.

Failing to find helpful advice from these sources, women undoubtedly sought it from a more readily accessible and socially acceptable quarter as well: the courtship novel. Even Portia of *The Polite Lady* recommended novels for her daughter’s edification. Soon after arriving in London, Sophia wrote to her mother that she hates idleness but needs some ideas on how to occupy her time. She would read but has heard “there are more bad than good ones, and don’t know what particular authors are most proper for my perusal” so she has been “afraid to dip too deep into them, lest I should do

²⁴ *The Polite Lady*, 39. Spellings have been modernized.

²⁵ *The Polite Lady*, 75. Spellings have been modernized.

myself more ill than good.”²⁶ Her mother instructs her to read histories to improve her mind as well as “novels, romances, plays, and every other kind of poetry,” specifically mentioning *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1747-8) among others.²⁷

Unfortunately for the improvement of Sophia’s mind, the courtship novel’s use as a source of advice is complicated by the marked increase in extreme sensibilities occurring in the eighteenth century. Samuel Richardson, author of both *Pamela* and *Clarissa*, incorporated into his popular novels the “nervous female characters of excessive sensibility” which helped link the idea of “heightened, intense human feelings” with that of extreme refinement.²⁸ As “the refined person” came to be “portrayed not so much as someone who was discerning but as someone who had an overwhelming, spontaneous emotional response to art,” it became a standard of one’s sensitivity and tenderheartedness to cry a quart of tears over the plight of a fictitious character in the latest novel and then, of course, advertise one’s weeping to all one’s friends and acquaintances.²⁹ Reading novels such as *Clarissa* and reacting in such a way was encouraged by society because it demonstrated just how sophisticated and cultured one was. Extreme sensibilities became fashionable and, as in any society, individuals within the society who anxiously sought to be accepted as part of the fashionable crowd followed the popular trends. Thus, the popularity of novels and the masses of women of all ages devouring them grew.

²⁶ *The Polite Lady*, 123. Spellings have been modernized.

²⁷ *The Polite Lady*, 143. Spellings have been modernized.

²⁸ John Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1997), 113-114.

²⁹ Brewer, 114.

As the number of novels being read increased, societal fears about the effects of these novels increased as well. Although married women who read such overly romantic novels would be able to compare real life in marriage gained via personal experience to the novels and hopefully avoid being swept away by the romantic sentiments expressed within the pages, such was not the guaranteed case with young unmarried women. Young women who read these books without having the benefit of personal experience in being married were influenced by the romantic aspects of their reading material. As a result, they created a view of courtship and subsequently marriage not based on reality but on a rosy fictional novel.

Novels filled with tales of romance and overly dramatic events in the lives of the heroines as each anxiously sought a husband and a life were devoured by readers who often failed to distinguish fact from fiction. Indeed, Erasmus Darwin in his *Plan for the Conduct of Female Education*, written around 1800, saw novels written by women as being “instructive” and believed that these “serious novels . . . would be especially helpful to young women who must choose partners for life.”³⁰ He asks:

Are young women therefore to be kept in intire [sic] ignorance of mankind, with whom they must shortly associate, and from whom they are frequently to choose a partner for life? . . . And how can young women, who are secluded from the other sex from their infancy, form any judgment of men, if they are not to be assisted by such books, as delineate manners?³¹

Darwin continues by relating a story he supposedly overheard from a “lady of fortune” who was bemoaning the fact that her guardian persuaded her to marry a disagreeable,

³⁰ Green, 51-52.

³¹ Erasmus Darwin. *A Plan for the Conduct of Female Education, in Boarding Schools, Private Families, and Public Seminaries* (Philadelphia: John Ormrod, 1798), 45. Spellings have been modernized.

selfish, and ill humored gentleman. According to the lady, she never would have willingly entered such a state if she had been allowed to read novels prior to her marriage because she would have known that not “all men were alike except in respect to fortune.”³² He warns, however, that:

It must nevertheless be observed, that the excessive study of novels is universally an ill employment at any time of life; not only because such readers are liable to acquire a romantic taste; and to return from the flowery scenes of fiction to the common duties of life with a degree of regret; but because the high-wrought scenes of elegant distress displayed in novels have been found to blunt the feelings of such readers towards the real objects of misery; which awaken only disgust in their minds instead of sentiments of pity or benevolence.³³

Although Darwin’s caution was not prompted by a fear of the novels creating a need in the readers for romantic dramatics, he still apparently believed that the readers of such novels would be influenced by the material they read.

Interestingly, only fifteen years previously, Clara Reeve appears to have taken a difference stance on the same novels. *The Progress of Romance* (1785) is organized as a series of evening conversations among three friends on the topic of romance novels. The main lecturer, Euphrasia, is determined to defend the novels while the other two friends, Hortensius and Sophronia, are there to listen, learn, and often challenge Eurphrasia’s statements. On the last evening of debates, Hortensius outlines the main problems with the romance novels:

The seeds of vice and folly are sown in the heart, – the passions are awakened, – false expectations are raised. – A young woman is taught to expect adventures and intrigues, – she expects to be addressed in the style of these books,

³² Darwin, 45. Spellings have been modernized.

³³ Darwin, 49-50. Spellings have been modernized.

with the language of flattery and adulation. – If a plain man addresses her in rational terms and pays her the greatest of compliments, – that of desiring to spend his life with her, – that is not sufficient, her vanity is disappointed, she expects to meet a Hero in Romance.³⁴

Euphrasia's response is that parents need to know what their children are reading and take an active role in their education.³⁵ As she says, "It is the more incumbent on parents and guardians to give young people a good taste for reading, and above all to lay the foundation of good principles from their very infancy."³⁶ After all, if they are made to "read what is really good" then they will grow to value those books and "despise paltry books. . . . When they come to maturity of reason, they will scorn to run over a circulating Library, but will naturally aspire to read the best books of all kinds."³⁷ Her point is that children learn from whatever they read and, as children borrow books from their friends, there is no way that a parent can completely ban a child from reading a romance novel. However, a parent can, by making sure they read worthwhile books as a child, train their children to enjoy such books as histories rather than romance novels.

It bears mentioning that most of the women authors of these same courtship novels were themselves never married, married later in life than normal and after having published multiple courtship novels, or married unhappily often ending in legal separation or divorce. As Katherine Green observes, "A cursory reading of available

³⁴ Clara Reeve, *The Progress of Romance Through Times, Countries, and Manners; with Remarks on the Good and Bad Effects of It, on Them Respectively; in a Course of Evening Conversations*, vol. II in *The Progress of Romance and the History of Charoba, Queen of Aegypt, Reproduced from the Colchester Edition of 1785* (New York: The Facsimile Text Society, 1930), 78. Spellings have been modernized.

³⁵ Reeve, 84.

³⁶ Reeve, 83.

³⁷ Reeve, 83.

biographical sketches reveals that about half of the two dozen women courtship novelists who did marry eventually separated from their husbands" while others simply never married.³⁸ Some, such as Hannah More, remained single for life. Although she accepted a proposal of marriage in 1769, More broke it off soon thereafter and subsequently turned down several other offers of marriage.³⁹ Other women writers married but only after writing and publishing most of their works and as such, when they were writing, had no experience in marriage. For example, Fanny Burney married, but only after remaining single for over forty years. Mary Wollstonecraft, the famous or perhaps infamous author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), was an unwed mother for many years before finally marrying William Godwin in 1797. Although the marriage was a happy one, it didn't last long: she died from complications in childbirth less than eight months later.⁴⁰ The majority of the productive writing time of life for both these women writers was prior to marriage and therefore, they were single when they were influencing other young women via their written words.

On the other hand, many women writers did marry. Unfortunately, their marriages were frequently marked by unhappiness and often ended in separation or abandonment. Charlotte Lennox, author of *The Female Quixote* (1752) among others, married at nineteen and apparently spent forty years in misery before gaining legal

³⁸ Green, 53-54.

³⁹ S. J. Skedd, 'More, Hannah (1745-1833)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, September 2004; online edition, October 2005 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/19179>, accessed 14 February 2006].

⁴⁰ Barbara Taylor, 'Wollstonecraft, Mary (1759-1797)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/10893>, accessed 14 February 2006].

separation from her husband.⁴¹ Charlotte Smith, author of *Emmeline* (1788), married at fifteen, but abandoned her husband, with whom she had twelve children, after twenty years while Sarah Scott, author of *The History of Cornelia* (1750), separated from her husband only a year after marrying him.⁴² Eliza Haywood, author of the popular *The History of Miss Betsy Thoughtless* (1751) as well as over fifty other novels, was widowed by 1719 and, describing her marriage as “unfortunate,” never married again.⁴³ Sarah Gunning, author of *Barford Abbey* (1768) and *The Memoirs of Mary* (1793), co-wrote several highly ridiculed romantic novels with her sister prior to marrying John Gunning in 1768. She failed to publish anything for the next two decades and only resumed writing in the 1790s in response to a scandal revolving around a failed marriage plot of her daughter and the subsequent rupture of her own marriage.⁴⁴ Frances Brooke was married but generally lived separately from her husband and often complained that he interfered with her “projects.”⁴⁵ Helen Maria Williams, author of the series, *Letters from France*, never married although rumors circulated while she was living in France linking her with John Hurford Stone, a divorced Englishman living in Paris.⁴⁶ Elizabeth Inchbald

⁴¹ Green, 53.

⁴² Green, 53.

⁴³ Joyce Fullard, ‘Collyer, Mary (1716/17–1762)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/5971>, accessed 15 February 2006].

⁴⁴ Pam Perkins, ‘Gunning, Susannah (1739/40–1800)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/11750>, accessed 15 February 2006].

⁴⁵ Mary Jane Edwards, ‘Brooke, Frances (bap. 1724, d. 1789)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/3540>, accessed 14 February 2006].

⁴⁶ Deborah F. Kennedy, ‘Williams, Helen Maria (1761–1827)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/29509>, accessed 14 February 2006].

was married in 1772 although it has been remarked that she did not marry for love and was unhappily married; when her husband died, she never remarried.⁴⁷ The novels of courtship and marriage that they penned were at odds with their own personal lives.

Even though these women did not obtain marital bliss for themselves, they continued to write novels about courtship and marriage. One of the better known female writers of the late eighteenth century is Ann Radcliffe (1764-1823), one of the few women writers to be apparently happily married and author of *The Italian* (1797) among other works.⁴⁸ Certain scenes in *The Italian*, such as the scene in which Vivaldi catches sight of Ellena through the window, are faintly reminiscent of William Shakespeare's tale of forbidden love, *Romeo and Juliet*. Unlike poor Romeo and Juliet, however, this tale does not end in the couple's death. But perhaps more worrying for societal parents, just as Romeo and Juliet disobeyed their parents in the face of their overwhelming love for one another, so too Vivaldi's parents disapprove of the young couple's attachment, but it has little affect on the youths:

Ellena, yielding to . . . the pleadings of her own heart, received Vivaldi as an acknowledged admirer, and the sentiments of his family were no longer remembered, or, if remembered, it was with the hope that they might be overcome by considerations more powerful.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Jane Spencer, 'Inchbald, Elizabeth (1753-1821)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/14374>, accessed 14 February 2006].

⁴⁸ R. W. Harris, *Romanticism and the Social Order, 1780-1830* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1969), 27. Robert Miles, 'Radcliffe, Ann (1764-1823)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, September 2004; online edition, October 2005 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/22974>, accessed 14 March 2006].

⁴⁹ Ann Radcliffe, *The Italian or the Confessions of the Black Penitents* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 36.

Regardless of parental disapproval and various other ostensibly insurmountable deterrents, Vivaldi and Ellena are united in marriage on the last page of the novel. A youthful reader, absorbing such a section in the middle of a novel brimming with overblown sentiments that, seemingly against all odds, manages to end happily, could easily take this as permission to disobey or disregard their parents when in love.

Another of Radcliffe's novels, *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, published in 1794, is humorously described as being "a novel of three hundred thousand words" in which the author "traces the adventures and sufferings of Emily St. Aubert, who must be the most lachrymose heroine in English literature. Sorely tried as she is, tears flow on almost every page, and she swoons more frequently than is good for any young lady."⁵⁰ Although Radcliffe tends towards the mysterious and Romantic more than mere courtship, her readers included such note worthies as Jane Austen who mentions *Udolpho* in her novel, *Northanger Abbey*, published in 1818. At one point, Catherine Morland, the main heroine, is found reading the novel. Catherine's reaction to the novel is described as filling her head with mysteries to the extent that she "was ready to see romantic adventure even in Gloucestershire."⁵¹ The implication here is that Gloucestershire is not a terribly exciting place and certainly not one in which romantic adventures take place regularly but, due to the influence of the romantic novel on her outlook, Catherine is willing to dramatize everyday occurrences.

The very fact that Austen is able to satirize *Udolpho* so successfully is evidence that many young women would have reacted in exactly the same way to these novels as the fictitious Catherine did. Young women who eagerly read the courtship novels created

⁵⁰ Harris, 27-28.

⁵¹ Harris, 33.

an image of marriage based upon the observations and thoughts of one who had either never entered that state herself or had entered it, found it undesirable and divorced or separated. Additionally, these courtship and gothic novels were fictionalized highly romanticized version of courtship and love written by women who rarely married and then often happily. Their version of events could therefore only lead up to the wedding day and not beyond. This causes several problems.

The first of these problems is that the writers themselves had no experience in being in a successful marriage. Therefore, it follows that they had no personal expertise in choosing a partner for a successful marriage. It would seem that better advice on courtship and marriage would come from one who had been married for some time. Despite this, Stone points out that by the 1780s, “there was a rising flood of [romantic] novels filling the shelves of the circulating libraries.”⁵² Even though John Brewer points out that in these great libraries, “for every ‘frivolous’ volume there were two of more serious reading matter” such as books of history, sermons, travel, and geography, he continues by saying:

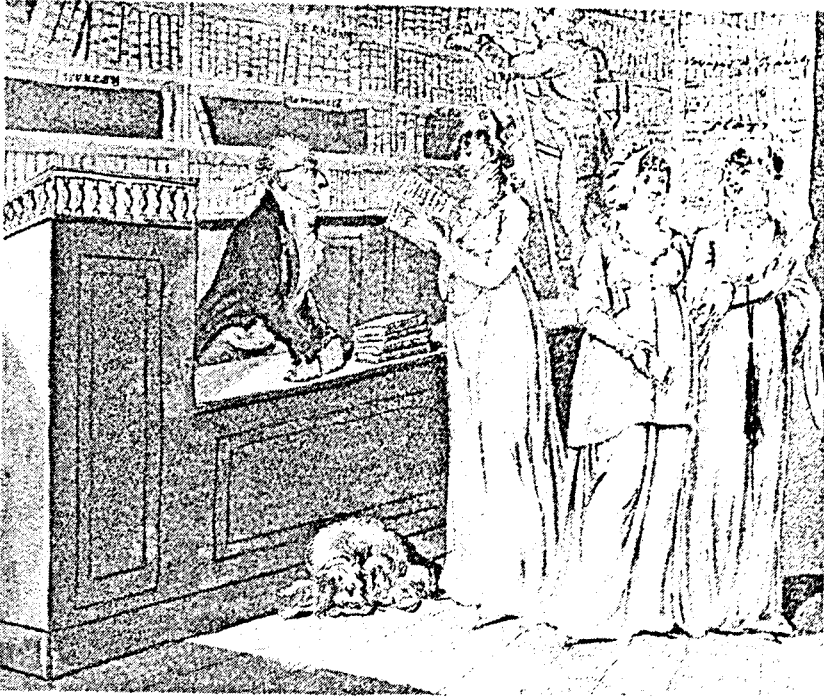
These figures refer to books on the shelf: no records survive to reveal the pattern of *borrowing* in a major circulating library. It may well have been that the sober histories and detailed travellers’ tales never received a second glance as readers hurried to the shelves of multi-volumed novels and well-thumbed romances.⁵³

Indeed, although there is little evidence that these novels were borrowed from circulating libraries with any greater frequency than any of the other books, sketches such as Isaac Cruikshank’s *Circulating Library* seem to emphasize the heavy borrowing of such

⁵² Stone, *Family, Sex, and Marriage*, 284.

⁵³ Brewer, 177.

books.⁵⁴ In it, “the shelves for novels, tales and romances are empty – all the books are out – but the sections for history, sermons and voyages and travels are full, attesting to their unpopularity.”⁵⁵ In 1796, *The Times* observed, “‘four thousand and seventy-three novels are now in the press from the pens of young ladies of fashion’.”⁵⁶ Stone concludes that “the results of massive exposure to this pulp literature was clear enough to contemporaries. Thanks to notions imbibed from this reading, young people fell headlong into the arms of whoever took their fancy, and, if their parents raised objections, they ran away to Scotland to get married in a hurry.”⁵⁷



66. *The Circulating Library* by Isaac Cruikshank, 1800–1815

⁵⁴ Isaac Cruikshank, “The Circulating Library” as reproduced in John Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1997), figure 66.

⁵⁵ Brewer, 177.

⁵⁶ Stone, *Family, Sex, and Marriage*, 284.

⁵⁷ Stone, *Family, Sex, and Marriage*, 284.

Further assisting the romantic courting were texts such as *The Lover's Instructor; or, The Whole Art of Courtship* (1770), *The Lover's New Guide; or, A Complete Library of Love* (1779), and *The Complete Art of Writing Love Letters; or, The Lover's Best Instructor* (1795). These books are perhaps best described as a modern day Idiot's Guide to Courting Romantically. They include such helpful topics as "The Art of Personal Courtship," "Forms of Address for Persons in Love," and the ever helpful, "Proper Forms of Reply for the Female Sex."⁵⁸ After all, in order to avoid stammering in maidenly confusion after being told by her suitor:

No man ever loved a woman as I love you. Reciprocally of affection can alone ensure our mutual happiness. If marriage be your view, as it is mine, say so at once, and let us be happy.⁵⁹

It would be helpful to go into that conversation armed with such positive replies as:

You talk like a man of honor and a gentleman; and therefore you have my consent to speak on this subject to my father.⁶⁰

Or, if he is unsuitable:

I cannot comply with your request: but hope you will not think I mean to affront you, Sir, when I declare, that I am prepossessed in favor of another.⁶¹

In any case, the very fact that literature such as that existed demonstrates that people were interested in the subject and an exchange that takes place between Mr. Collins and Mr. Bennet in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) makes it appear that the books were

⁵⁸J. Coote, *The Lover's Instructor; or, The Whole Art of Courtship* (London: King's Arms, 1770), 85. Charles Freeman, *The Lover's New Guide; or, A Complete Library of Love* (London: Alex. Hogg, 1779), 97-103.

⁵⁹ Freeman, 99.

⁶⁰ Freeman, 102.

⁶¹ Freeman, 103.

well enough known to catch her eye. Austen has Mr. Collins reply to Mr. Bennet's inquiring if he rehearsed his compliments to the ladies prior to delivering them by saying, "They arrive chiefly from what is passing at the time, and though I sometimes amuse myself with suggesting and arranging such little elegant compliments as may be adapted to ordinary occasions, I always wish to give them as unstudied an air as possible."⁶² There is little doubt Austen found humor in Mr. Collins and entirely possible that what she viewed in humor, parents of marriageable aged daughters viewed in horror.

It appears that the fear held by society of an increase in overly dramatic courtships and un-advantageous marriages entered for possibly fleeting emotional reasons was greater than the actual occurrences of such scandalous courtships and marriages. There is evidence that there was an increase in marriages based upon love rather than created by arrangement but that in and of itself does not prove an increase in drama. However, evidence is not necessarily needed to fuel a fear held in common by society. According to Janet Todd, by the end of the eighteenth century, "hardly any serious person had a good word to say for it [the courtship novel] and radicals, liberals and conservatives vied with each other to hurl abuse at the escapist, self-indulgent, immoral fantasy which they believed the women's novel had become."⁶³ The female romance novel reader scarcely fared better. She was held in a combination of contempt and fear; contempt because she was "filled with delusive ideas, swayed by false ideas of love and romance, unable to concentrate on serious matters" and fear that these misguided notions would lead her "to frivolity, impulsiveness and possibly to sexual indiscretion."⁶⁴

⁶² Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (Connecticut, The Heritage Press, 1940), 74.

⁶³ Todd, 227.

⁶⁴ Brewer, 193.

An infamous example of this sort of behavior can be found in the history of Lady Sarah Lennox. Despite the fact that there is no evidence that Lady Sarah read romantic novels, her reaction to falling in love was suitably impulsive enough to grace the pages of one and certainly indiscrete. Despite being married to Lord Charles Bunbury at the time, Lady Sarah risked everything when she fell in love with Lord William Gordon in 1768: she fled to Redbridge in Southampton where she found lodging using the assumed name of "Mrs. Gore" and where her lover posing as "Mr. Gore," joined her soon thereafter.⁶⁵ After being discovered, they fled again, this time to Scotland where once again they were shortly discovered. The affair subsequently fell apart; Lady Sarah returned to her brother the Duke of Richmond's protection, Lord Gordon departed for the Continent, and Lord Charles began divorce proceedings.⁶⁶ As Madame du Deffand, a contemporary of Lady Sarah's, wrote in a letter to Horace Walpole, "The more I reflect upon the story, the more I find it worthy to be the basis of a novel."⁶⁷

Similarly, in 1779 Fanny Burney mentions a runaway marriage in her diary:

Amongst the company, I was most struck with the Hon. Mrs. W——, lately Miss T——. She ran away with a Mr. W——, a man nearly old enough to be her father, and of most notorious bad character, both as a sharper and a libertine. This wretch was with her—a most hackneyed, ill-looking object as I ever saw; and the foolish girl, who seems scarce sixteen, and looks a raw schoolgirl, has an air of so much discontent, and seems in a state of such dismal melancholy, that it was not possible to look at her without compassionating a folly she has so many years to live regretting. I would not wish a more striking warning to be given to other such forward, adventurous damsels, than to

⁶⁵ Edith R. Curtis, *Lady Sarah Lennox: An Irrepressible Stuart 1745-1826* (New York: G. P. Putman's Sons, 1946), 218.

⁶⁶ Curtis, 222-230.

⁶⁷ Quoted in Curtis, 219.

place before them this miserable runaway, who has not only disgraced her family, and enraged her friends, but rendered herself a repentant mourner for life.⁶⁸

Although there is no knowing if Miss T—— ran away with Mr. W—— because she fancied herself in love with him, it seems likely that she did. Otherwise, there is no explanation for why she would risk losing her family and friends for a much older worn-out man. Neither is there evidence that Miss T—— read romantic courtship novels prior to her elopement; however, her irregular marriage was exactly the sort of action that society feared.

This fear provided fertile ground for Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* (1811). Marianne Dashwood first meets John Willoughby when he appears immediately following her disastrous race down a hillside in a heavy rainstorm. Marianne trips, spraining her ankle on the way down. Willoughby, seeing "she was scarcely able to stand," "took her up in his arms without further delay" and proceeds to carry her home.⁶⁹ Austen describes the mother's reaction to this heroic rescue: "Had he been even old, ugly, and vulgar, the gratitude and kindness of Mrs. Dashwood would have been secured by any act of attention to her child; but the influence of youth, beauty, and elegance, gave an interest to the action which came home to her feelings."⁷⁰ Subsequent events show that Marianne is affected in a similar manner which grows on her part to love. As a result, she is shown willing to behave impulsively and improperly by writing to Willoughby

⁶⁸ Fanny Burney, *The Diary of Fanny Burney* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, Ltd., 1940), 42.

⁶⁹ Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 35-36.

⁷⁰ Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*, 36.

who is soon after proven a false lover by abandoning Marianne in favor of marrying another, richer, young lady.⁷¹

Although *Sense and Sensibility* happily closes with Marianne making the advantageous marriage to Colonel Brandon, the novel still reveals the fear found in society that young couples would be borne away by romantic impulses resulting in a bad marriage or worse, public indiscretions and no marriage at all. *The Bon Ton Magazine*, a fashionable magazine of the late eighteenth century, warned in 1792, “‘women of little experience are apt to mistake the urgency of bodily wants with the violence of a delicate passion’”⁷² and therefore, “‘mistake male lust for the emotion they read about in novels.’”⁷³ It was feared that under this mistaken identification of love, these young women would act rashly and ruin their futures.

However, Brewer concludes, judging from the male dominated membership lists of circulating libraries, “the flighty novel reader was just as likely to be male as female.”⁷⁴ Additionally, while the reading of courtship novels was unlikely to refine or improve the mind of the reader, reading such novels would not automatically make the reader completely lose the perspective on life she or he already held. Some readers knew, in the end that “‘the heroine of the novel is not exactly fitted for the exemplary wife’, and that passion based on external appearance ‘may consist with very great defects of temper and moral character.’”⁷⁵ Anna Larpent, who read constantly and recorded the

⁷¹ Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*, 161-163, 168.

⁷² Quoted in Stone, *Family, Sex, and Marriage*, 284.

⁷³ Stone, *Family, Sex, and Marriage*, 284.

⁷⁴ Brewer, 179, 194.

⁷⁵ Stone, *Family, Sex, and Marriage*, 286.

book titles and her thoughts on them, was not beguiled into believing all she read.

During a span of ten years, from 1773 to 1783, of the almost four hundred and fifty novels she read, only forty-six can be considered English courtship novels.⁷⁶ Her opinions on those she read were tempered by a vast selection of other works including writings by Rousseau, Voltaire, Corneille, Shakespeare, Gibbon, Hume, Adam Smith, Pope, Johnson, and Swift, as well reading the Bible, sermons, and other pious tracts.⁷⁷ In 1774, she wrote that novels “are too seducing, too trivial, too dangerous” for one “to encourage a taste” in reading them.⁷⁸ Reading novels along with other literature was unlikely to be damaging but society feared that not all women readers would read such a variety of literature.

This first problem caused women writers such as Maria Edgeworth and Jane Austen to begin writing a different kind of novel: one that focused on the importance of women’s education and the development of reasoning. In contrast to many of the courtship and gothic novel writers, neither Edgeworth nor Austen ever married. Edgeworth received a marriage proposal while in Paris in late 1802 and early 1803; despite a genuine liking for the man, she turned him down.⁷⁹ Letters written by Edgeworth years later illuminate the possibility that she regretted her decision though she continued to avoid the gentleman in question.⁸⁰ Although there is evidence that Jane

⁷⁶ Brewer, 194.

⁷⁷ Brewer, 194.

⁷⁸ Brewer, 197.

⁷⁹ Marilyn Butler, *Maria Edgeworth: A Literary Biography* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1972), 192-195.

⁸⁰ Butler, 216-219.

Austen was courted by several gentlemen and family lore combined with the remains of letters to her sister indicate that she fell in love with an Irishman while living in Bath, she remained single until her death.⁸¹ Granted, the lack of a wedding band and the experience of being in love are not mutually exclusive, but it does mean that neither woman had personal experience in being married, no matter how observant she may have been of married couples. Regardless, both Edgeworth and Austen wrote novels that dealt with courtship and, to some degree, marriage. However, they approached this by now familiar topic with a different goal:

It was essential to expose the false or “romantic” modes of operation encouraged by other novelists, and to replace the unrealistic conventions of the updated Cinderella, the Gothic, the silver-fork novel with a clear-sighted sense of the limited possibilities of real life.⁸²

For these women writers, it was important that their female readers, gullible or not, gain a more accurate perception of life, courtship, and marriage. However, they still had to entice the reader into reading the novels they wrote and so they went about this task in several ways. The first was to write stories that took the romantic impulsive stereotypical feminine heroine to the extreme.

Novels and particularly short stories such as Maria Edgeworth’s “Angelina” began to appear. “Angelina,” titled after the main character, is about a young woman who had been encouraged to read courtship novels without any other education to give her a standard of reference by which to judge the novels. As a result, Angelina “creates a dream world of romance based on reading” and “then sets out into the real world to find

⁸¹ George Holbert Tucker, *Jane Austen the Woman* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1994), 47-59.

⁸² David Stone, *The Romantic Impulse in Victorian Fiction* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), 3.

it.”⁸³ She predictably fails to find her dream world in the real world and the entire story mocks female readers who might, having been raised in a similar fashion, react in the same way in their own lives.

Likewise, Jane Austen’s first writings openly poke fun at the overly sensitive society women. In *Love and Friendship*, the two heroines behave in a proper sensible fashion after seeing their husbands terribly wounded and perceived as dead from a carriage accident: “Sophia shrieked and fainted on the ground – I [Laura] screamed and instantly ran mad–. We remained thus mutually deprived of our senses some minutes, and on regaining them were deprived of them again.”⁸⁴ Almost proudly, the heroine continues, writing to her reader, “For an hour and a quarter did we continue in this unfortunate situation – Sophia fainting every moment and I running mad as often.”⁸⁵ These impressive actions, though evidence of their extreme refinement, result in the illness of Sophia, much to the sorrow of Laura:

Amidst my lamentations for her (and violent you may suppose they were) I yet received some consolation in the reflection of my having paid every attention to her that could be offered in her illness. I had wept over her every day – had bathed her sweet face with my tears, and had pressed her fair hands continually in mine. ‘My beloved Laura,’ said she to me, a few hours before she died, ‘take warning from my unhappy end and avoid the imprudent conduct which has occasioned it... Beware of fainting fits... Though at the time they may be refreshing and agreeable, yet believe me, they will, in the end, if too often repeated and at improper seasons, prove destructive to your constitution... My fate will teach you this... I die a martyr to my grief for the loss of Augustus... One fatal

⁸³ Mark D. Hawthorne, *Doubt and Dogma in Maria Edgeworth* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1967), 36.

⁸⁴ Jane Austen, *Love and Friendship* (London: Hesperus Press Limited, 2003), 28.

⁸⁵ Austen, *Love and Friendship*, 28.

swoon has cost me my life... Beware of swoons, dear, Laura... A frenzy fit is not one quarter so pernicious; it is an exercise to the body and, if not too violent, is, I dare say, conducive to health in its consequences. Run mad as often as you choose; but do not faint.'

These were the last words she ever addressed to me. It was her dying advice to her afflicted Laura, who has ever most faithfully adhered to it.⁸⁶

Sensible advice, no doubt. Although in later years Austen would more aptly conceal her laughing disdain for such dramatics, her novels would continue to slyly grin at the extreme sensibilities and romanticism of the fashionable lady. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Mrs. Bennet is continually moaning about her nerves – generally seen as a mark of tremendous refinement and yet Mrs. Bennet is hardly what one could consider refined. Jane Austen describes her as “a woman of mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper” who “fancied herself nervous” when she was really merely discontent.⁸⁷ The biggest reservation Mr. Darcy, the great snob, has about his friend Mr. Bingley marrying Miss Jane Bennet is her mother.

In yet another scene in *Pride and Prejudice*, when Miss Bingley, another arbiter of taste, hears that Mr. Darcy has been contemplating Elizabeth Bennet’s “fine eyes” and the “very great pleasure” they bring him, she replies, “I am all astonishment. How long has she been such a favourite?—and pray when am I to wish you joy?”⁸⁸ Miss Bingley has immediately made the romantic, if somewhat jealous, leap of logic from his admiring someone’s eyes to falling in love with her and arriving at the fanciful conclusion of Elizabeth and Darcy marrying. Disregarding Darcy’s response – “That is exactly the

⁸⁶ Austen, *Love and Friendship*, 31-32.

⁸⁷ Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 5.

⁸⁸ Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 28.

question which I expected you to ask. A lady's imagination is very rapid; it jumps from admiration to love, from love to matrimony in a moment. I knew you would be wishing me joy." – in Miss Bingley's mind, it is a foregone conclusion; indeed, as she says, "if you are so serious about it, I shall consider the matter as absolutely settled."⁸⁹ In both Mrs. Bennet's and Miss Bingley's cases, Austen has shown them, both of whom believe themselves to be socially acceptable, in a negative light.

Later, the silver fork novels, a genre of novels dedicated to revealing the inner workings of high society, would partially continue this negative caricature of young sentimentalists as well as provide examples to follow in lieu of dispensing advice. As Cynthia Lawford writes about Letitia Landon's *Romance and Reality* (1831):

But what about . . . those sentimental young ladies and gentlemen? . . . Theirs are in many ways the quandaries of the novel's young male and female characters, as they endeavour amid the chatter and earnest discussions to find out what to do with their lives. Thus *Romance and Reality* contains much advice for romantic young adults. . . . For the sentimental young women. . . : cope as best as you can with your limited chances, cherishing those 'illusions' which are 'the magic of real life' (vol. ii, p. 216), but learn what not to do through the example of the too romantic heroine.⁹⁰

Indeed, love, romance, and marriage are rarely portrayed in a completely positive fashion in the silver fork novels. Instead these novels attempt to show the reality of life while still providing enough romance to entice the reader into perusing the novel. The result is a somewhat confusing mixture of positive and negative views on the same subject. As Landon says in the third volume of *Romance and Reality*, "Let no one say that I am

⁸⁹ Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 28.

⁹⁰ Letitia Landon, *Romance and Reality* (1831), ed. Cynthia Lawford, vol. 2, *Silver Fork Novels, 1821-1846* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2005), xv-xvi.

trying to make young people romantic. . . . Every fable has its moral; and that of love is disappointment, weariness, or disgust.”⁹¹ By the end of *Romance and Reality*, the romantic and yet still single heroine, Emily Arundel, has died simply by wasting away, possibly from the sheer exhaustion caused by her escapades throughout the rest of the novel, at the youthful age of twenty-one. As Cynthia Lawford sums it up, these novels attempted to speak “for the desire to cling to past ideals” of the previous century as well as “to temper that idealism with an understanding of how cruel circumstances and human beings can be” by showing the negative side of life in a fairly blunt fashion.⁹²

Yet even they fail to completely realize reality and fall back into following the dictates of the previous century. For instance, Rosina Bulwer Lytton, unhappily married to and separated from Sir Edward Bulwer Lytton, wrote and published *Cheveley; or, The Man of Honour* (1839) under her full title as a way of publicly wreaking vengeance on her erstwhile husband “for his adulteries, his violence towards her, and for taking their children Emily and Robert from her, as well as for banishing her from the family home.”⁹³ Semi-autobiographical, the majority of the novel depicts married life in a decidedly unromantic fashion; however, the ending is decidedly romantic: “Cheveley is vulgar enough to doat [sic] upon his wife, and Julia’s love and respect for her husband increases daily, from finding, that in every relationship of life, from the smallest to the greatest, he is a MAN OF HONOUR.”⁹⁴ This final picture of wedded bliss is somewhat at odds with the rest of the novel.

⁹¹ Landon, 334.

⁹² Landon, xx.

⁹³ Rosina Bulwer Lytton, *Cheveley* (1839), ed. Marie Mulvey-Roberts, vol. 5, *Silver Fork Novels, 1826-1841* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2005), x.

Two years prior to the publication of *Cheveley*, Marguerite, Countess of Blessington, published *Victims of Society* (1837). Marguerite was first married at age fifteen to St. Leger Farmer, Esq. in 1804; the marriage must not have agreed with her as she apparently abandoned Farmer, returning to her family only months later.⁹⁵ She then entered into the protection of Captain Jenkins through whose acquaintance she met Viscount Mountjoy, future Earl of Blessington. Captain Farmer fortuitously died in 1817 and early the following year Marguerite married Blessington.⁹⁶ Although *Victims of Society* is not Lady Blessington's first published work, it beautifully depicts the dichotomy found between the flighty romance reader of the eighteenth century and the prudent novel reader of the nineteenth century. Additionally, the entire novel serves as a sort of metaphor: Lady Augusta, the heroine of *Victims of Society*, is situated evenly between two very different women characters (Lady Mary and Caroline Montessor). Lady Mary is a well-bred, rational woman – exactly the sort of woman held up by Edgeworth and Austen as being the ideal woman.⁹⁷ Caroline Montessor is better described as being “‘corrupted’ by stories of passion, intrigue and seduction” – both the exact opposite of Lady Mary and the sort of female reader society feared.⁹⁸ Lady Augusta is planted firmly between these two influences; as Ann Hawkins and Jeraldine Kraver describe it, “Between Lady Mary, the model of domestic bliss, and Caroline Montessor, the model of moral superficiality, Blessington places the tragic Lady

⁹⁴ Lytton, 444.

⁹⁵ Marguerite, Countess of Blessington, *Victims of Society*, ed. Ann R. Hawkins and Jeraldine R. Kraver, vol. 4, *Silver Fork Novels, 1826-1841* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2005), viii.

⁹⁶ Alison Adburgham, *Silver Fork Society: Fashionable Life and Literature from 1814 to 1840* (London: Constable and Company Limited, 1983), 28, 29.

⁹⁷ Blessington, xxiii.

⁹⁸ Blessington, xxiv.

Augusta.”⁹⁹ Augusta, just as the modern reader, must decide whose dictates, those of Mary and domesticity or Caroline and superficially, to follow. She chooses unwisely; under the influence of the corrupt Caroline, Augusta is led down a path of destruction through an ill choice in husbands, his ensuing rejection of her, and ultimately ending in her death.¹⁰⁰ *Victims of Society* is obviously a novel of what choice not to pick.

In addition to showing their readers what not to do, these new novels would provide positive examples for their young readers to follow. Sometimes the advice is limited to curtailing the overblown dramatics of the previous century. For instance, in a scene in *Cheveley*, Miss Mac Screw, through dramatically reacting to a shopkeeper’s prices by throwing herself into the nearest chair, unintentionally manages to glue a bill with the words “To be disposed of, inquire of the proprietor” to the back of her dress.¹⁰¹ When she subsequently walks down the street, catcalls and laughter follow. The point of the scene – to refrain from dramatics – is more obviously shot home by the reactions of her companions upon discovering the advertisement pasted to their friend’s back:

The former [Mrs. Tymmons] nearly went into hysterics on the spot; and Miss Seraphina would have made it a point to faint, but that she providentially remembered, just as she was going off against a lamp-post, that she had somewhere read in one of her favourite fashionable novels that there was nothing so vulgar as making a scene, even let the provocation be what it might; accordingly she returned to the perpendicular, and looked immoveable.¹⁰²

⁹⁹ Blessington, xxiv.

¹⁰⁰ Blessington, xxii.

¹⁰¹ Lytton, 194.

¹⁰² Lytton, 195.

In this scene alone, the melodramatic woman is negatively portrayed and finds herself in an embarrassing situation while the young woman who has been reading her fashionable novels is saved from a similar misstep by recalling their advice against such theatrics.

In addition to promoting a more decorous carriage, these novels also often advocate the importance of education and the role women ought to take in society and even politics. Edgeworth's *Helen* makes this point. Helen is a quiet young lady who has caught the eye of Beauclerc, the hero of the tale. The novel follows the misunderstandings typical to romance even as it follows the quiet teachings Lady Davenant attempts to impress upon her young friend in hopes of guiding her through this courtship to a happy marriage. One conversation, held between Lady Davenant and Helen, focuses on the importance of women in politics. Lady Davenant chides Helen:

Women are now so highly cultivated, and political subjects are at present of so much importance, of such high interest, to all human creatures who live together in society, you can hardly expect, Helen, that you, as a rational human being, can go through the world as it now is, without forming any opinion on points of public importance. You cannot, I conceive, satisfy yourself with the common namby-pamby little missy phrase, 'ladies have nothing to do with politics.'¹⁰³

She then cautions Helen against interfering but still advocates the importance of influencing one's husband. Lady Davenant, and Edgeworth through her, is attempting to impress on Helen, and the reader, that a woman has a mind and can, indeed should, educate it and use it in all parts of life. Educated women have the ability to think and make sound judgments during the times when they had the power over the direction of

¹⁰³ Maria Edgeworth, "Helen," in *Tales and Novels*, vol. 10 *Helen* (New York: AMS Press, Inc., 1967), 260.

their own lives and to consider, even after marriage, to continue using the power they had to favorably direct society.

The second problem with using courtship novels as advice for conducting a courtship and gaining a husband is that once the proposal has been made, eternal love declared, and perhaps the wedding date set, the novel comes to a close. The reader is left with a new husband but no guidelines on what to do with him or her own home. This issue, like that of the unrealistic highly dramatic courtship practices to which Edgeworth and Austen took objection, was also being addressed by the middle of the nineteenth century. Edgeworth tackled this problem early in "The Modern Griselda" published in 1805. Griselda Bolingbrooke is a newlywed who is determined to rule her home and husband. Unfortunately for her, the tactics she applies, a mixture of arguments, tears, sudden smiles, and generally behaving like a wayward child, which worked so well during courtship, backfire in a fairly predictable fashion: her husband shakes loose of any desire for her much less any desire to please her. In effect, Mr. Bolingbrooke ceases to be a lover and, in truth, ceases to be a husband as well as he concludes that a divorce is the best option for his continued well being. Sadly, by the end of the short story, Griselda has discovered how she ought to have acted as well as realized that she truly loves her husband who is now lost to her through her own manipulations. What is spectacular about this tale is the subtle use of comparison between Griselda and her hostess, the quiet socially unfashionable Mrs. Granby. Mr. Granby allows himself to be completely ruled by his wife's softly spoken wishes – exactly the state of affairs Griselda wants for herself. Curious about how Mrs. Granby achieved this status when she herself is failing, Griselda questions her:

“Good Heavens! – He could not do more for you if you were his mistress.”

“He never did so much for me, till I was his wife,” said Emma.

“That’s strange! – Very unlike other men. But, my dear,” said Mrs. Bolingbroke, taking Mrs. Granby’s arm, and drawing her aside, “how did you acquire such surprising power over your husband?”

“By not desiring it, I believe,” replied Emma, smiling; “I have never used any other art.”¹⁰⁴

Griselda is the stereotypical flighty, pampered, romantic novel reading social butterfly.

Mrs. Granby is the polar opposite of Griselda, a wife who thinks only of her husband’s wellbeing and works to support him in every way. And yet, it is Mrs. Granby who has the better relationship with her husband. It is Mrs. Granby who has merely to mention a wish to have it granted. It is Mrs. Granby who has the control over her husband’s actions. Edgeworth is aiming to show the romantic reader, once again, how ridiculous the overly dramatic actions really are and to depict how one ought to go about achieving happiness with a husband.

Mrs. Catherine Grace Frances Gore also tackled this problem in a similar manner. While little is known about Mrs. Gore prior to her marriage to Lieut. Charles Arthur Gore in 1823, it is known that “the years following their marriage were ones of intense creativity” for her.¹⁰⁵ She churned out several novels before *Women As They Are* in 1830 and almost fifty more novels prior to her death in 1861.¹⁰⁶ As Alison Adburgham points out, Mrs. Gore’s novel, *Women As They Are, or The Manners of the Day* (1830) “begins,

¹⁰⁴ Maria Edgeworth, “The Modern Griselda,” in *Tales and Novels in Ten Volumes*, vol. VI, 407 – 470 (New York: AMS Press, Inc., 1967), 454.

¹⁰⁵ Adburgham, 162, 164.

¹⁰⁶ Adburgham, 162, 322.

instead of ends, with the marriage of hero and heroine [emphasis mine].”¹⁰⁷ The couple in question is a young lady named Helen who is married somewhat against her will to much older though still handsome Lord Willersdale. Through various misfortunes usually brought on by themselves and a lack of communication deftly assisted by Lord Willersdale’s deceitful sister, Helen grows to love her husband and discovers that he loves her. Interestingly, Mrs. Gore opens this novel with a definition of what a good marriage is:

‘A good marriage’ . . . is generally understood to include the promise of a park in the country, and a mansion in town; a set of horses, a diamond necklace, and an opera box; and it may be fairly allowed that there are many such marriages. An *excellent* match affords a mere multiplication of these advantages, and is unhappily of such rare occurrence as to form an eighteen day’s wonder.¹⁰⁸

Despite the romantic misunderstandings and typical adventures found in the novel, the definition provided of what makes a good marriage includes no mention of romance or heroic gentlemen saving swooning young ladies in distress.

Six years later, Mrs. Gore published *The Diary of a Désennuyée* (1836). This heroine starts off as being disinclined to trust romance again; after what was apparently a marital experience so unhappy as to be unspeakable in the first few pages of her diary, she describes herself as “re-enter[ing] the world with a heart steeled to insensibility, and a resolution to be indebted to my head alone for future pleasures.”¹⁰⁹ Her resolution to refrain from romance is understandable after learning that her previous marriage

¹⁰⁷ Adburgham, 165.

¹⁰⁸ Catherine Gore, *Women As They Are; or, The Manners of the Day*, 2nd ed. (London: Henry Colburn & Richard Bentley, 1830), 1-2.

¹⁰⁹ Catherine Gore, *The Diary of a Désennuyée* (Philadelphia: E. L. Carey and A. Hart, 1836), 4.

commenced after an acquaintance with her future husband of only six weeks.¹¹⁰

Although her attempt at romance resulted in a marriage that she regards as best being forgotten, the rest of the novel follows her through her re-entry into London society. Perhaps predictably, the novel ends with her revealing that she has fallen in love again and has accepted the gentleman's offer of marriage. In both novels, Mrs. Gore is attempting to show that what makes a marriage successful isn't the overblown dramatics of fictitious romance.

Other authors also took on the task of giving solid advice to their young readers. By the middle of the nineteenth century, advice books such as *The Daughters of England: Their Position in Society, Character, and Responsibilities* (1843); *The Wives of England: Their Relative Duties, Domestic Influence, and Social Obligations* (1843); and *The Women of England: Their Social Duties, and Domestic Habits* (1843), all of which were written by Mrs. Sarah Stickney Ellis, had appeared. Mrs. Ellis possesses a somewhat negative view of courtship: "How often is the progress of courtship no better than a system of fulsome adulation, and consequently of falsehood, carried on exactly as if marriage was indeed the end, instead of the beginning, of their mutual existence."¹¹¹ Therefore, she set out to educate her young female readers both on what marriage is actually like and how to correctly prepare for it. Her first step is to guide them through multiple steps and questions designed to make sure that the reader is marrying the correct gentleman for her. Her questions are humorous, yet pointed: "Are you weary of his presence, and relieved when he goes away? or [sic] are you disposed to exercise less

¹¹⁰ Gore, *The Diary of a Désennuyée*, 4.

¹¹¹ Ellis, 15.

charity and forbearance towards his faults, than towards the faults of others?"¹¹² Her conclusions, based upon the supposition that the reader answered yes to any of the questions, are also rather sharp: "You do not love him as you ought" and "there is little probability that you will afterwards evince towards him that respect and reverence which is right and seemly in a wife."¹¹³ After an honest and through self study guided by these questions, the reader had to have been left no doubt whether the man she was set on marrying was the correct choice for her.

Now that the reader has decided whether or not she is marrying for the correct reasons, Mrs. Ellis then continues in such a way as to destroy any overly romantic expectations left over from courtship held about marriage:

In the first place, what is it you are expecting? – to be always flattered? Depend upon it, if your faults were never brought to light before, they will be so now. Are you expecting to be always indulged? Depend upon it, if your temper was never tried before, it will be so now. Are you expecting to be always admired? Depend upon it, if you were never humble and insignificant before, you will have to be so now.¹¹⁴

Her stark answers to these pointed questions on marital expectations do not paint a rosy picture for the romantic reader. Mrs. Ellis does not stop with the depressing news there either, she also gives the newly married (and even long time married) women advice on how to behave as a wife and the obligations of being a wife. She states:

One important truth sufficiently impressed upon your mind will materially assist in this desirable consummation – it is the superiority of your husband, simply as a man. It is

¹¹² Sarah Stickney Ellis, *Wives of England: Their Relative Duties, Domestic Influence, and Social Obligations* (New York: J. & H.G. Langley, 1843), 7.

¹¹³ Ellis, 7.

¹¹⁴ Ellis, 10.

quite possible you may have more talent, with high attainments, and you may also have been generally more admired; but this has nothing to do with your position as a woman, which is, and must be, inferior to his as a man.¹¹⁵

Rather bluntly, Mrs. Ellis is demonstrating that no matter what happened during courtship, in marriage the husband is expected to rule the household and the wife to obey his commands. Whatever power she held over him has been given up in exchange for his ring and last name. Furthermore, and perhaps most helpfully, she includes in *The Wives of England* a section each on "The First Year of Married Life," "Characteristics of Men," and "Behavior to Husbands."¹¹⁶ She also includes twelve pages on "Trials of Married Life" which contains problems arising in every marriage as well as the correct response of the wife.¹¹⁷ For instance, if the reader is married to a "man who is . . . neither to be convinced that after ninety-nine failures, he is not very likely to succeed the hundredth time," she is advised to store up "supplies of strength and patience beyond what any earthy source can afford."¹¹⁸ While the portrait of the ideal woman Mrs. Ellis paints a picture of would be beyond any normal woman to follow, at least the reader now has some sort of guidelines to attempt to follow.

Other books joined those of Mrs. Ellis on the shelf, such as *How, When, and Whom to Marry, with Observations on the Causes of Marriage Being so Often Unhappy* and *The English Wife, a Manual of Home Duties, Designed as a Sequel to The English Maiden* (1843) which is self described as containing for the "Young Wife," "the Proper

¹¹⁵ Ellis, 10.

¹¹⁶ Ellis, 15 – 38.

¹¹⁷ Ellis, 54 – 66.

¹¹⁸ Ellis, 56.

Rules, not only for securing her husband's affection, but also for conducting her establishment."¹¹⁹ *The Family Friend* (1849) pointedly questions the young wife, "If it requires some little care to foster the admiration of a lover – how much more requisite to keep yourself lovely in the eyes of him to whom there is now no privacy or disguise" after admonishing her that "now is the time for you to exhibit superior taste and excellence in the cultivation of your address, and the becoming elegance of your appearance."¹²⁰

From the middle of the eighteenth century to the middle of the nineteenth century, British society, and women writers in particular, were transforming the literature its youth read from a mixture of courtship novels, romantic novels, and to some extent gothic novels with highly dramatic and overly romantic scenes in the late eighteenth century to the didactic novel and marital advice books of the early nineteenth century. The call for this transformation was a result of societal fears that the romantic sentiments popular in high society and easily located in the novels lining the circulating libraries and personal collections were adversely affecting the courtship and marital expectations of the teenage reader. Specifically, their elders worried that these novels were influencing the youthful readers into mistaking lust for love and running away with their temporary lover. These seductions not only ruined any hope the woman had of making a successful and happy match, they also potentially caused women to find themselves trapped in a marriage neither partner enjoyed due to increased expectations of marital bliss combined with a

¹¹⁹ Janet Dunbar, *The Early Victorian Woman: Some Aspects of Her Life (1837-57)* (London: George G. Harrap & Co. Ltd, 1953), 18.

¹²⁰ Jenni Calder, *Women and Marriage in Victorian Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 33.

lack of information on how to achieve that marital bliss. The feared result was a long disappointing slide to misery and possibly the public scandal of a divorce.

These misgivings prompted certain novelists to change the material they wrote. Some, such as Maria Edgeworth and Jane Austen, first over dramatized their heroines in order to forcibly, yet still humorously, show their young readers how ridiculous it was to build dreams based on the material found in romantic novels. In later works they then appear to back off on the subject but in reality they simply became more subtle in their efforts. Other writers, such as Mrs. Ellis, resorted to the marital advice books in hopes of guiding the young women readers through the steps needed to create a successful and happy marriage, including the all important step of accepting the right man's hand in marriage.

The didactic novel and the marital advice books of the early nineteenth century answered the fears expressed by society in the late eighteenth century of elopements and unhappy marriages by transforming the way courtship and marriage was portrayed in the literature read by Great Britain's youth. Unfortunately, it can be argued that the efforts of these women writers to dispel the fairytale romantic mist from openly read literature actually helped those romantic dreams to turn into a somewhat guilty secret two centuries later. Rather than outwardly acknowledging the desire for high flown romantic escapades, those desires have been curtailed from public view, buried deep within the heart of most young women. They know it's not rational, intelligent, or educated to wish for a handsome young prince in bright shining armor astride his white horse to come galloping up and rescue her – his dream girl, the one he's been searching for his entire life – from whatever she imagines is wrong at that moment. They know it's extremely

unlikely to happen; that's why those stories are called fairytales and besides, there aren't that many princes around anyway. But that doesn't stop the wish from being born deep inside romantics. The evidence that such a desire is around can be found in the popularity of the romance novel,¹²¹ the number of chick flicks opening in theaters every year, the plethora of magazines providing relationship advice, not to mention the numerous online dating services.¹²² The evidence that it is repressed is the laughing denial of the reason one goes to see a romantic comedy, why one reads a romance novel, why one is so willing to read those fashion magazines at the hairdressers. It couldn't possibly be because for a few moments one can imagine that she is the heroine of the story – no, these days, a young woman is too realistic to think that – or at least too realistic to say it in public. Yet, as George Levine says, "Repressed desire turns out, after all, to be desire." Hiding it doesn't cause it to cease to exist; it merely makes it harder to see. Despite the best efforts of those determined women writers, centuries later our romantic ineptness and continued dependence upon fairytale romance keeps us courting disasters.

¹²¹ Pamela Clare, "Romancing the Store: Why Not Give Women What They Want?," *Publishers Weekly* 252, no. 46 (November 21, 2005): 56. Ms. Clare points out that in 2004, romance novels created \$1.2 billion in sales and that they accounted for 54.9% of "all popular paperback fiction sales." Additionally, according to Shelley Mosley, a librarian who is quoted in the article, "In public libraries that carry romance, only CDs, DVDs and children's books are more popular with patrons."

¹²² There are actually two films ranked as the top grossing film of all time depending upon whether or not the list of theater sales has been adjusted for ticket inflation or not. *Titanic* (1997) is the top grosser if the rank is based on ticket sales. *Gone with the Wind* (1937) is the top grosser if the rank is based on ticket sales after being adjusted for ticket sale inflation. Regardless of which ranking one chooses as being more correct, both *Titanic* (1997) and *Gone With The Wind* (1939) can be considered romantic films. *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, online edition, s.v. "List of Highest Grossing Films." [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_highest-grossing_films Accessed 20 April 2006 Page last modified 07:20, 16 April 2006].

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