
EDUCATIONAL HORIZONS IN THE WORKS OF FEMALE AUTHORS BETWEEN 1770 AND 1830

Female Voices: Forms of Women's Reading, Self-Education and Writing in Britain (1770–1830). Edited by Éva Antal and Antonella Braidà. Recherches Interdisciplinaires et Transculturelles. Besançon: Presses universitaires de Franche-Comté, 2022. Pp. 268. ISBN 978-2-84867-933-4.

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Books lie on the shelves, on the table and even on the floor as Minerva crowns a reading woman with a laurel: the abundance of knowledge and acknowledged female mastery welcomes the reader on the cover of *Female Voices: Forms of Women's Reading, Self-Education and Writing in Britain (1770–1830)*. The illustration is borrowed from *The Lady's Magazine* (vol. XX, 1789), and it represents a frequent motif, as Dóra Janczer Csikós reminds readers later in her essay. The image embodies the topics discussed in the collection: the importance of self-improvement and self-education for British women (and in some cases authors from the continent also involved) in a volume covering the period “from the mother, Mary Wollstonecraft to the daughter, Mary Shelley,” as the editors express (15). The collection reflects on how the women of the specified period managed to find different aims to articulate their thoughts and ideas for self-expressive and educative purposes. The volume is a significant contribution to the study of British literature as it aims to amend the British literary canon by calling attention to the role of women in shaping society and art.

The British society's attitude to the female voice during the 19th century is summarised by the opening essay “The Corinne Effect: British Responses to the Reading of Madame de Staël's *Corinne* (1807)” by Hannah Moss. Shortly after the French writer's *Corinne* had been published, reactions appeared in literary forms on the other side of the Channel. Critics attacked *Corinne* in terms of its radical portrayal of a free-spirited Anglo-Italian poet and argued that the main character could not suite the British social norms. Moss examines a novel, a novella and a poem written in response to *Corinne*. A parody, *The Corinna of England* was published in 1809 by an anonymous author (who is probably the little-known woman novelist E. M. Foster). However, Moss emphasises that the novel does not necessarily condemn the idea of a successful poet but rather highlights the consequences of unsupervised education. *The History of an Enthusiast* (1830) by Maria Jane Jewsbury also sheds a critical light on the character of Corinne by showing a heroine, Julia Osborne, whose enthusiasm for art leads her to heartbreak as she must abandon love and

family life by sacrificing them on the altar of literary fame. The author argues that the work is probably the product of its writer's misery as she was forced to focus on domestic life and had to suppress her literary aspirations. To offer a lyrical perspective, Moss turns our attention to the work of Felicia Hemans, who found her literary doppelgänger in Corinne. Moss in this short section analyses Hemans's poem "Corinne at the Capitol," and concludes that the author felt sympathy for Corinne, as her experiences spoke to her, especially regarding her miseries and hardships. The different interpretations illustrate the various attitudes to the position in society which female creative artists were expected to occupy.

The above-mentioned Dóra Janczer Csikós begins her essay, "Reflections and Thoughts on Education: from *The Lady's Magazine* to Mary Hays's *The Victim of Prejudice* (1799)" by describing a dominant view on women's education presented by John Bennett's work *Strictures on female education; Chiefly as it relates to the culture of the heart* (1787), which salutes the equality between the sexes in Britain. His ideas were praised, only *The Lady's Magazine* refused to do so, as it is evident that Bennett's views are only limited to the traditional ones and he advocates gender-specific education for boys and girls. This educational model based on separation due to the allegedly different intellectual qualities the sexes possess is refuted and disputed by women authors. Mary Hays's novel, *The Victim of Prejudice* (1799) follows the life of Mary Raymond, an orphan who is – although educated – taught to "think but not to reflect" (77). Csikós argues that Hays shows through female characters only the negative sides of the different kinds of education they received and the lack of support from society.

There were, nonetheless, instances when the access to knowledge was free and open, as Kiel Shaub's "Critical Companions: Arts-and-Sciences Education for Women and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818)" reveals. In London educational institutions were established, such as the Royal Institution of Great Britain and the Surrey Institution, where anyone who was interested in the announced lectures could attend them, regardless of their gender or social status. However, the participants received no qualification. These lectures were popular especially among women whose experiences and reflections were manifested in different kinds of publications. Unfortunately, the arts-and-sciences institutions became gradually less inclusive and multidisciplinary as the repression of fine arts started. Mary Shelley attended Coleridge's lectures, which proves she was aware of how these institutions worked. Shaub's aim was to analyse *Frankenstein* within this context.

Krisztina Kaló in her essay "Clara Reeve's Epistolary Novel in the Service of Female Education: *The School for Widows* (1791)" mentions the importance of literary salons for women, as these spaces provided an opportunity for exchanging ideas. She goes on to argue that publishers of the 18th century realised the need

for intellectual improvement especially among middle-class women. The novelist Clara Reeve stands in the author's focal interest, who gave voice to women, especially widows, through her works. Reeve was a well-educated writer who was influenced by the classics. According to her, the novel must fulfil two purposes: enjoyment and moral improvement; hence, her writings also served a didactic end. The subject of her novel is a marginalised group, namely, widows. Kaló points out that in the British literary canon unmarried women above 30 years of age were either comic figures or invisible ones, although she offers two contrasting views by other researchers concerning the truth about the vulnerable position of widows who inherited nothing from their deceased husbands. Reeve's novel has two main characters, Mrs. Frances Darnford and Mrs. Rachel Strickland, who are both honourable but must endure hardships resulting from their new social status. In Kaló's reading, Mrs. Strickland is a good example for widows to find ways to become useful members of the society by doing charity work. In Mrs. Darnford's case, her corrupt husband's nightlife and gambling addiction cause financial problems. Her husband's immorality and thirst for luxury is contrasted with Mrs. Darnford's virtuousness and modesty. However, Kaló reminds us that even though it is to Mrs. Darnford's merit that she could stand up after her social status had changed, as she became a governess and later opened a school, her attitude as a wife was often obedient towards her unethical husband, which leaves the system of patriarchy unquestioned.

Educating others is more prominent in Alexandra Sippel's essay, titled "Dispelling Economic Misconceptions: Jane Marcet's Teaching on Political Economy." Marcet was known for writing *Conversations* on various subjects, including sciences, philosophy, history etc. Intellectual circles welcomed her and she was respected by male scientists. To preserve the stability of the British society, Marcet found it her duty to educate the citizens of the country and debunk the misconceptions on the imbalanced relationship between the working class and the upper classes by illustrating through her literary works that the growing capital of the rich benefits the lower classes, as well. The social tension between the working class and the employers increased, as dissatisfaction over low wages and the working and living conditions grew. In her educative writings Marcet challenges the prejudices against the upper classes by using a language which makes her text digestible for non-aristocrats, since it discusses political economy within the frame of tales. In her writings she tried to prove that everyone was moving towards the same goal. Sippel, however, highlights that Marcet promoted no political activism for women. She stuck to the status quo regarding women's place in society and even though she emphasised the importance of education for women, she limited it to the purposes of being an intelligent conversationalist and mothers being good teachers for their offspring.

In “Educating to Economic Realities through Fiction: Maria Edgeworth and Jane Austen,” Marie-Laure Massei-Chamayou also portrays a woman who shared her knowledge to encourage self-improvement. Edgeworth was an exceptional figure, as her father invested in her education, which allowed her later to become the accountant for the family and publish educational writings on the topics of economy, such as “The Orphans” and “The Purple Jar” for children, and “The Good Aunt” and “The Absentee” for adults. Supported by Jane Austen’s novels, the author argues that people in general and women in particular became increasingly interested in the financial matters of estates and annual incomes, since marriage for the latter did not only mean financial but also existential stability. In Massei-Chamayou’s reading the main goal of Edgeworth, whose works were not unknown to Austen, was to warn the public of the dangers material goods could mean to them and to advertise modesty and efficient financial strategies.

Hélène Vidal in her essay “Self-fashioning in the Age of Sensibility: the Duchess of Devonshire’s Educational Writings” studies another woman, Georgiana Cavendish, who thanks to her mother’s support received excellent education and produced literary works for educational purposes. The author examines two epistolary novels, *Emma* (1773) and *The Sylph* (1779), and one pedagogical play, *Zillia* (1782) to reveal that Cavendish is concerned with self-development and ethics. Her main themes include benevolence and generosity. In *The Sylph* and in *Zillia* the heroine can rely on somebody during her journey of personal growth, while *Emma* follows a more traditional line portraying an obedient daughter and wife. Vidal suggests that Lady Georgiana’s *Bildungsromane* can be interpreted as autofiction, a combination of autobiography and novel, a genre that allows the author to create a fictional self for herself, finding her own voice through the characters.

Similarly, for the writer, poet, playwright, and translator Mary Tighe her mother also played a crucial role in her life, as Harriet Kramer Linkin describes in “Reading Mary Tighe Reading.” Tighe’s mother as a Methodist leader provided her daughter with sufficient intellectual stimuli. Linkin emphasises that while Tighe found her own voice, she stayed loyal and respectful to her mother. The study analyses two literary works by Tighe, *Psyche; or the Legend of Love* and *Selena*. Both novels focus on self-improvement and self-education.

A different genre and purpose appear in the poetry of Hannah Cowley, as described by Angela Escott in “War Dramatised in Hannah Cowley’s Epic Poem *The Siege of Acre* (1801).” Although the noble genre of the epic was considered a masculine territory, Escott reminds us that in the 18th century there were prominent female figures who composed “long poems of this nature,” such as Mary Robinson, Helen Maria Williams, and Anna Seward, to name only a few (145). What distinguished Cowley from the others is her rather plastic representation of the war. She not only

focuses on the sentimental aspects of her subject matter, but she also profoundly and accurately describes the siege of Acre in 1799 and contemplates on war itself and with it the enigma and complexity, or, rather, the paradox of human nature as it oscillates between aggression during war times and kind-heartedness in other circumstances. Cowley's epic is based on historical events, however, she also included two episodes of fiction.

David García in "Where arts have given place to arms': the Poetry of Helen Maria Williams in *Paul and Virginia* (1788)" scrutinises Williams's own sonnets in her translation of Jacques-Henri Bernardin de St. Pierre's work from the viewpoint of Williams being an Englishwoman held under arrest in France and touches upon the political implications her texts suggest. By the reviewers these sonnets are called "embellishments"; however, García proposes the term "interspersed" due to the multifunctionality of Williams's sonnets. Her poems allow disguised political messages and reinforce the novel's sentiment but they can also be read alone. García concludes that Williams managed to create a method for finding her own voice in a place where British writers were monitored by censorship.

Another political writing in the disguise of a literary work is examined by Anthony John Harding in "Mary Hays's *Female Biography*: Writing Women into the Public Sphere." Hays's *Female Biography* consists of six volumes of "lives of notable women" (90). Harding contextualises the birth of the project by recapitulating British social norms. Similarly to other studies of this volume, Harding describes Britain as a country where women with an urge to influence society or to create were heavily discouraged and ignored, which deepened the contrast between the public and the domestic sphere. However, as biography was a respected genre, Hays utilised its potentials and collected women of the past – queens, military leaders, writers, luminaries, and supporters of female education – and shared their values and achievements with the British community without idealising them. She also used her biography to point out tragedies concomitant of misogyny.

Another collection of female figures – though this time fictional ones – was provided by Anna Jameson. In "Literary Criticism as Women's Rights Activism in Anna Jameson's *Shakespeare Heroines*," Magdalena Pypeć notes that even though Jameson's views were similar to Wollstonecraft's, she chose a different strategy by using a diplomatic language in her works, thus avoiding radicalism to gain popularity. Jameson also highlighted that her aim was to provide a portrait of feminine nature and Shakespeare's characters were good examples for that because in her view they are profound characters who possess real-life qualities. In her book, Pypeć notes, Jameson not only writes as a literary critic, but also makes subtle hints at political and social matters. For instance, as opposed to critics before her, she reads Lady Macbeth as a caring wife and a supportive partner, not solely evil incarnated.

Angelika Reichmann's "Reading and Female Development in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794)" focuses on the topic of reason and the female mind, which appear in diverse forms in the other essays, however Reichmann (and Nóra Séllei) focuses on this issue. Reichmann first examines the two human attributes of reason and sensibility within the framework of *The Mysteries of Udolpho*; the second part of her essay is devoted to the close analysis of the novel, in which she connects the heroine's, Emily's transgressive act of reading with desire and self-development.

Nóra Séllei's essay, "Education, the Female Body and Feminine Embodiment in Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792)" takes a different viewpoint, as I see, a rather contemporary somaesthetics approach to the most well-known protofeminist's work. Séllei distinguishes the female body and the feminine embodiment, that is, the subject's consciousness of her corporeality and its cultural associations. Wollstonecraft did not intentionally reflect on the female body in her text, but the topic holds relevance within the framework of reason and sensibility. *A Vindication* not only makes a political statement but also focuses on the human qualities, as Wollstonecraft argues that women are rational beings, not only sensible ones. Even though the notion of the blending of reason and sensibility appeared in the 18th century, this was only limited to men, and in women's case feeling was still considered the dominant feature by default, as opposed to men. Sensibility is connected to the body, as its responses are communicated primarily through bodily expressions such as blushing, fainting etc. In this light Wollstonecraft criticises the damaging traditional view of the female body in the works of Rousseau and Milton, though she does not reflect on it directly. Séllei also mentions that if women lack the quality of reason, which is attributed to men, women stay with sensibility and sensuality, limiting their identity to their body with its derogatory associations. As far as the relationship between mind and body is concerned, Wollstonecraft refutes the idea of the (male) genius whose intellectual strength is balanced by his physical weakness and she argues that there is no such connection between the two, as opposed to her contemporaries. By emphasising the role of education, she covers the mind as well as the body. Séllei also notes that Wollstonecraft's vision was nonetheless utopistic and the self-empowered woman she imagined was a wife, a leader of the household, whose lifestyle promoted a well-balanced marital relationship.

The collection does justice to important female figures who, otherwise, are not integrated into the rather male-dominated British literary canon of the late 18th and early 19th century. Hence, we can find many names in the essays that used to be beyond the scope of research on the respective era's mainstream literary figures. The index of the volume helps readers to navigate their way among the wide range of authors. The book contributes to today's feminist discourse by presenting women of the past who were interested in different tools for education, social standards.

and genres, and were either radicals or not, but all of them were headed towards the same goal, even if their reasons were dissimilar: the significance of women's education and their intellectual improvement.