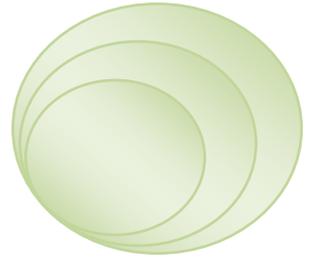


The Importance of Study for Women and by Women: Hannah More's Defence of Female Education as the Path to their Patriotic Contribution



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In the late eighteenth century we observe an intense debate regarding female education, an issue that generated great controversy and discomfort in society, as it threatened the long-established patterns of women's inferiority which confined them to the domestic and private sphere. One of such writers was Hannah More who, though not defying the status quo, does claim for a more comprehensive education for women. The writer in question was a prominent literary figure of this period and her fame is not confined solely to her time; on the contrary, Hannah More is one of the authoresses of the eighteenth century who has known a renewed interest by modern readers. One of her works in particular illustrates her disappointment regarding the inadequate female education which she considered to be the source of many flaws, mistakes and imperfections traditionally associated with most women's behaviour.

More's *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education, with a View of the Principle and Conduct Prevalent Among Women of Rank and Fortune* (1799) stresses the importance of study for women and by women, since it was the only way they could ascend spiritually and promote the harmony in their proper, private sphere, that is, the domus. However, regrettably she merely points out guidelines instead of suggesting a feasible and complete curriculum. Such work aimed at developing the awareness that it was imperative to offer women a more complete



education which aimed at more than external accomplishments and domestic expertise. This book strongly posits the argument that the educational female model was considered, at the time, inadequate and incomplete.

The popularity of Hannah More's writings on society reflected the increasing concern and anxiety that were felt in that period towards women writers. Although this writer was not as studied as the other authoresses of her period, namely renowned essayists like Catharine Macaulay and Mary Wollstonecraft who wished for an equality of rights, Hannah More has been continuously recognised, especially to illustrate that not all writers of the time were feminists (cf. Keane 1). In fact, More does not fit in the type of the "radicals", since her writings demonstrate a fervent defence of the current social patterns. Actually, More's conservatism made her extremely popular in the following century, since her behaviour suited the ideology of femininity of the time. Indeed, the essayist defends the gender difference in relation to their distinct spheres of action. Although she wants to raise the status of women and, implicitly, to broaden their social influence, she never abandons the notion that such performance should be firmly based on their domestic and family role (cf. Stafford 30). She regards education as rather specific in terms of gender, as men and women were, in her opinion, physically and intellectually different. Therefore, they should fulfill different duties and should receive the kind of education that would prepare them to carry out those duties.

Hannah More produced several works of various genres, having received, like her sisters, instruction from her father in order to become teachers. Despite her delicate health, even before she was four, the young Hannah could already read and showed an unusual aptitude for learning. In order to spare her such effort, her father tried to stop her education, but, together with her mother, she convinced her father to carry on with her instruction. She was particularly interested in the education of the less favoured people, having established several schools with her sisters. In her journeys to London she met David Garrick, Samuel Johnson, Edmund Burke, Horace Walpole, Elizabeth Montagu and Thomas Caldwell, who would become the main publisher of her numerous writings.



As was previously mentioned, while authoresses such as Mary Wollstonecraft and Catharine Macaulay, inspired by the American and French Revolutions, demanded the extension of human rights to women, Hannah More feared threat of social disorder as a consequence of the revolutionary ideology and adopted a conservative evangelical position, emphasising the traditional female role. That is the spirit with which the essayist, extremely concerned about the state of the nation, urges her compatriots to take part in the salvation of the country:

In this moment of alarm and peril, I would call on them with a “warning voice” which should stir up every latent principle in their minds, and kindle every slumbering energy in their hearts: I would call on them to come forward, and contribute their full and fair proportion towards the saving of their country. (More I, 4)

The anxiety of the authoress stems from the fear that the atheism and the philosophy resultant from the French Revolution would affect England and even all of Great Britain. It is obvious that More believed that women played an important role in the maintenance of the values and moral and religious traditional practices that, in turn, constituted the backbone of the nation:

Many contemporaries believed that the state of a nation’s political structure, its manners, morals and religious observance, determined its strength, and since morals and religion, in particular, were considered to be the province of women, it was on them that the strength and stability of the nation were largely dependent. (Ashley 15)

The well-known concern about the influence of riots across the English Channel and the repercussions they could have in English society was effectively widespread, thus justifying the intense apologetics for core religious beliefs and a matching conduct:

The eighteenth-century opens and closes with a wave of evangelical enthusiasm when fears of social disorder in a period of great moral laxity and dissoluteness led to an urgent need for the middle and upper classes to set an example to those below them in the social



hierarchy. And to work for the inculcation of the principles of Christian morality in labouring classes. (Hill 17)

It is in this context that the Blue Stockings Society of England appears, reaching a significant popularity by the end of the century. It consisted in a group of privileged and cultured women who shared an interest in education and promoted meetings to discuss literature, and also invited erudite men to participate in these meetings. In the male society of the time, the “Blues” were able to provide a serious alternative to card games and drink, a trendy occupation at the time (cf. Kenner 188). As Cheryl Turner points out: “The Bluestockings provided perhaps the most influential social, intellectual and literary network to include a cluster for women” (Turner 107). The Society included important female figures such as Elizabeth Montagu, Elizabeth Vesey, Frances Boscawen, Elizabeth Carter, Anna Laetitia Barbauld, Frances Burney, Hester Chapone, Sarah Fielding, Catharine Macaulay, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and Clara Reeve, among others. Regarding the male members who took part in the assemblies, there were prominent personalities such as Edmund Burke, Samuel Johnson, Sir Joshua Reynolds, Horace Walpole and Benjamin Stillingfleet.

Hannah More, one of the Blues, took advantage of the opportunity of conversation and exchange of ideas with experts, which allowed her to further her education, a goal that she never neglected until the end of her life. The Blue Stockings Society had an important role regarding female education, since it illustrated the ingenuity of women who, having been denied a formal education which aimed at more than external accomplishments, found an alternative way to satisfy their desire to learn while disguising their activities with their widely accepted role as hostesses (cf. Bodeck 186). In 1786, Hannah More publishes the poem *Bas Bleu; or Conversation*, where she praises the quality of the debates of the Society and describes the moral and educational objectives of that new space for cultured women. The authoress expresses her gratitude, emphasising the importance of the Bluestockings in relation to the progress of society by preserving the moral standards and by the sustained apology of education. However, without



doubt everyone in the assemblies also benefited from the opinions of Hannah More:

In the figure of More, in particular, we reach the limits of Enlightenment: committed, as second-generation Bluestocking, to the ideals of rational autonomy and female education, she nevertheless contributed to the transformation of the Enlightenment project of society into one in which the lower orders of society were “progressed” by their spiritually enlightened “betters”. (O’Brian 34)

Hannah More started her career as a poetess and a playwright, becoming, later on, an icon of the defence of the Christian woman, writing several treatises of religious and moral nature. Most of the authoress’s contemporary critics received her pious and reformatory texts in a very favourable light, praising her purpose in the publication of such texts:

[U]pon Mrs. More character, as a writer and as a moralist, it cannot be necessary to expatiate, the obvious tendency of her works, and the comprehensive circulation with which those works have been received, decide the establishment of their character, in both respects. (Anon. “Review of The Works of Hannah More” 526-527)

The work here approached, *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education, with a View of the Principle and Conduct Prevalent Among Women of Rank and Fortune*, was relatively well-received by the contemporaneous critics: for example, *The British Critic* considered it as “one of the most valuable works that ever came before us” (Anon., “Review of Strictures on Female Education” 651). On the other hand, *The Monthly Review*, despite praising the ideological purity of More, considers that she is too tied to her religious beliefs:

We must candidly confess that we cannot bestow on them unalloyed praise. She writes with elegance, variety, and ease, and lays down a number of excellent rules for the conduct of women: but her sentiments appear to us to be too much narrowed by her religious system, and the world seems to be too often viewed by her through the mists of – we had almost said – Methodism. (Anon., “Review of Strictures on Female Education” 411)



Hannah More is sometimes presented as extremely religious for the Age of the Enlightenment, as the following comment states: “[More’] religion is of too rigid a cast for enlightened society” (Anon., “Review of *Strictures on Female Education*” 411). Despite that fact, through her intense activity as a writer, she acquired a comfortable life standard and a nationally recognised status (cf. Turner 79). *Strictures* had 13 editions during her life alone. When the authoress died, at the age of 88, she left a considerable amount of thirty thousand pounds to several charity institutions (cf. Uphaus / Foster 386), probably hoping that those institutions would improve female education.

In 1978, Richard Polwhele published “*The Unsex’d Females: A Poem*”, which exemplifies the condemnatory rhetoric that stigmatised several women writers of the late eighteenth century. The female writers of this time were regarded with suspicion, especially those who addressed subjects such as religion or politics, thus breaking out of their proper, private sphere. Therefore, women were constantly under the scope of society and every misconduct or deviation from the expected behaviour could make irreparable harm to their reputation and, hence, to their place in society. Women writers in particular were at all times monitored, as they could be easily condemned for overstepping the line of female propriety, and even considered traitors to their sex and ultimately to their nation. Recent criticism has even noted that, for some, the mere act of using a pen for publication purposes was deemed subversive, as the pen might be considered a symbolic phallus, therefore unsexing female writers. The Oxford English Dictionary gives the following definition of the word “unsex”: “deprive of gender, sexuality, or the characteristic attributes of one or other sex”. And this was precisely what Polwhele had in mind when he wrote his poem, although he recognised no harm was done when proper women wrote about morals and manners, enforcing the traditional female roles. Hannah More is set as an example, because she was by no means menacing to social stability as she believed that “the profession of ladies, to which the bent of her instruction should be turned, is that of daughter, wives, mothers and mistresses of families” (More I, 107).



More's influence was felt long after her death, especially during the Victorian Age: "[More] was in effect replacing a decaying social paternalism with maternalism, a proto-Victorian ethic of responsibility and nurturance" (Myers 232). Despite More's apology of the reform of the female educational model, she never suggests that education would be a platform. Despite her plight for women's right to education, she does not, at any time, suggest that it should be seen as a platform for gaining "rights", as such a demand imperiled women's religious nature and therefore collective rules of conduct. As Jane Rendall observes: "The writer's purpose was evangelical in its bid to prepare women for the afterlife, and domestic in its attempt to prepare women for their role within the home" (Rendall 112-113).

The difficulty of "labelling" Hannah More and the controversy that has generated regarding her classification as anti-feminist, counter-revolutionary or even conservative feminist (cf. Midgley 8), clearly shows that, as far as Women's History is concerned, nothing is linear and everything is likely to be scrutinised and catalogued according to the purpose of each critic. The emphasis on female education and conduct arose because it was believed that any failure in the moral and religious duty of women could put the entire future of the nation in danger. At a time when the threat (for some) and the promise (for others) of change seemed imminent, it was recognised that the current educational model was inappropriate because it failed to prepare women to play their part. Consequently, it was necessary to reform and improve feminine education to ensure women's understanding of their obligations and the best way to fulfil them.

Hannah More was convinced that educational reform was a way to promote the rejection of revolutionary ideas by women. The advice she offers her contemporaries may seem somewhat contradictory since, on the one hand, it seems avant-garde as, for example, the repudiation of the traditional model of education. On the other hand, the conservative suggestion that women can increase their power through religious practice and charity works may be perceived as radical if we consider the feminist implications in relation to women's rights. She recognises that the increase of power through religion is something more attainable



to women: “Christianity has exalted women to true and undisputed dignity” (More II, 31-32).

According to Karen Offen, “Feminism is the name given to a comprehensive critical response to the deliberate and systematic subordination of women as a group by men as a group within a given cultural setting” (Offen 21). Such a definition would certainly answer any doubts about whether Hannah More was a feminist or not, as she never questions the patriarchal framework of her time, and even defends and reinforces it. Instead of choosing a label and sticking to it, I believe that all opinions should be embraced, because, despite her conservative and traditional principles, Hannah More did strive to offer women a better education, not only through her writings, but also through the schools she founded and the considerable sum she left to charity works upon her death. She truly believed in the crucial importance of providing women with a useful education, the vital need of study for women and by women. Her contribution as an advocate for female education, regardless of her motivations and principles, should be considered as an invaluable asset for all of those who are interested in Women’s Studies.

¹ Anna Scott has a book with the title *Hannah More: The First Victorian* (2003).

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