THE ACCOMPLISHED LADY IN THE ENGLISH NOVEL

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When Dorothea Brooke visits the Vatican museum on her honeymoon in Rome, she is seen by an artist who identifies her as a perfect model for a madonna. Romola, who is repeatedly apostrophized as a madonna, poses as Ariadne for a portrait. These descriptions of the heroines of Middle-march and Romola as devotional figures and art objects allude to a view of woman often expressed in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century English novels, that a woman may be judged according to her ability to resemble a work of art, to emulate the idealized portrait of womanhood society holds up to her. But another way, woman’s aim is supposed to be self-perfection, with woman herself as both artist and artifact: To be a thing of beauty is the traditional role assigned her. However, just as the standard of beauty changes over the course of a century, so do the specifications of the traditional role. These changing specifications are illustrated in the characterizations of the accomplished lady in the English novel.

The ideal of the accomplished lady in the eighteenth-century novel incorporates an ornamental education with genteel housewifery, the willing acceptance of which is indicative of the moral character of the lady in question. The accomplishments of the lady include both the practical and the decorative crafts such as needlework and china painting. Because young ladies were taught music and drawing for specific domestic application rather than for purely aesthetic purposes, these too adorn the accomplished lady. For she ought to have been able to decorate her home with objects of her own making as well as be personally ornamental in her beauty, dress, conversa-

tion, and ability to entertain by singing a popular song or playing a reel for an evening’s dance. In the nineteenth-century novel, this woman’s role is still pervasive, but is accompanied by a dramatic change in the value assigned woman’s work. As a result of this revaluation, woman’s accomplishments increasingly go beyond the domestic sphere as a means of personal success.

Authors use fine distinctions within the range of activities accorded women to indicate the position of women in society, reflect upon changing marriage ideals, promote self-esteem among their heroines, and comment upon woman’s contribution to society. The didactic attention given to women’s accomplishments in the eighteenth-century novel makes them an easy target for satire in the nineteenth-century novel, but also evolves into a reassessment of the value of woman’s work, the domestic crafts-woman, and the woman artist. This evolution in woman’s work and role forms the basis for the ensuing inquiry. Surveying a broad range of novels, including work by Richardson, Fielding, Burney, Austen, Dickens, Thackeray, the Brontes, and Eliot; and relying on the conduct books and Ruskin as reference points about the perceived role of women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; I trace the evaluation of woman’s work by focusing on the accomplished lady.

The conduct books present ornamental accomplishments as woman’s duty along with piety, maidenly virtues like modesty, and domestic skills. The Ladies Calling juxtaposes ornamental and housekeeping skills with religious piety by advising women to “secure themselves by a constant serious
Employment" with that which is "worth their time: wherein as the first place is to be given to the Offices of Piety" and next

the acquiring of any of those ornamental improvements which become their Quality, as Writing, Needle-work, Languages, Music, or the like. If I should here insert the art of Economy and Household Managery, I should not think I affronted them in it; that being the most proper Feminine business, from which neither wealth nor greatness can totally absolve them.¹

Further, the conduct books reason that the purpose of acquiring feminine accomplishments is to secure a husband as The Ladies Calling indelicately adjures: "An old maid is now thought such a curse as no Poetic fury can exceed, look'd on as the most calamitous Creature in nature" (II, i, 3). A few generations later, Hester Chapone softens the phrasing, saying that a lady's accomplishments will make her "so desirable a companion" that "the neglect of them may reasonably be deemed a neglect of duty."² According to this circular reasoning, then, a woman's duty includes becoming both accomplished and a wife, one dependent on the other.

While the focus of the various conduct books varies, they all provide advice on the same range of activities.³ Hester Chapone's list has more breadth than others, for she argues that women are capable of a more demanding education than is usually afforded them. She emphasizes the need for reading on the subjects of religion, history, poetry (particularly Shakespeare and Milton), nature studies, moral philosophy, and books on taste and criticism in order to be a good conversationalist; dancing and French as of equal importance; Italian—optional; handwriting and common arithmetic "indispensable"; music and drawing "as genius leads"; and a warning against the study of classical languages (III, 129-174). Sermons to Young Women makes a virtue of developing these accomplishments. For example, rather than simply recommending drawing and music to those who have talent, Fordyce advises young women to take up these arts as a means of entertainment for themselves and others, as well as to prevent the folly and sin proceeding from idleness. If the lady be a musician, her art must have an inspirational value. Her music should "prove a kind of prelude to the airs of paradise."⁴ Fordyce finds a "moderate and discreet use" of dancing tolerable since dancing is connected with Old Testament worship, but also because the dancer is a work of art. Dancing promotes health, good humor, sociability and "that easy graceful carriage, to which Nature has annexed very pleasing perceptions in the beholders" (I, 226).

On the subjects of dress and needlework, Chapone suffices with a few words about economy and good sense, but the male conduct book writers expound on the duty and virtue in them. Fordyce goes so far as to recommend that women do needlework during conversation so as to be continually busy and as a buttress against the emptiness and gossip to which conversation can descend—almost as if the needlework were a simultaneous reparation for the sinful conversation. He adds, of needlework, that "We find it spoken of in scripture with commendation" (I, 239 and 249). The kind of advice in Sermons to Young Women did not go unnoticed—Fanny Burney, Susan Ferrier, and Jane Austen all allude to the work. Mary Wolstonecraft's reaction is more encompassing: "It moves my gall to hear a preacher descanting on dress and needlework."⁵

Several novels seem to put to deliberate application some of this conduct book advice on the efficacy of education and acquiring of grace, polish, and skills in order to become a companionable wife by emphasizing its importance in the courtship process. Some of Austen's heroines display their individuality and intellectual acumen and thereby their marriageability—by debunking the poetry of sensibility and carrying on critical conversations on literature. The heroines of Pride and Prejudice and
Persuasion are thus quite different from the young ladies in Evelina who are silenced by a rebuke for expressing their criticism of a bawdy comedy. In a Victorian novel, Charlotte Yonge's The Heir of Redclyffe, the young Morvilles and Edmonstones are idealized for putting their education to good use by engaging in long and frequent literary discussions.

Besides serving as a lure for prospective husbands, developing the lady into a display object, and refining her virtue, feminine accomplishments have a practical-religious application in the form of philanthropy. Novelists and conduct book writers alike wax eloquent on the desirability of young ladies saving some of their pin money for good works among the poor. Burney's heiress-heroine Cecilia does this in a grand way by supporting several deserving poor folk and educating impoverished young girls. In Susan Ferrier's Marriage, A Novel, the exemplary Scottish lady, Mrs. Douglas, busies herself knitting stockings for poor children during the hours devoted to conversation (heeding Fordyce's advice), and turns her husband's wild Highland farm into a scenic wonder by directing the labor of otherwise idle and useless children under the age of twelve. Austen scales down such enterprising generosity in Persuasion where the invalid Mrs. Smith earns the admiration of the heroine by selling her needlework in order to help support families even poorer than herself. Even Anne Brontë's pathetic governess-heroine, Agnes Grey, derives her only satisfaction from her charities among the poor cottagers. George Eliot, in contrast, alludes to the hypocrisy in this kind of philanthropy by making Dorothea's relatives obstruct or ignore her attempts to give away money and design more habitable cottages for her tenants. Dorothea finally realizes that she is using the poor and even her own charitable instincts to find an occupation for her time.

The early novelists mirror the values of the conduct book writers by portraying an easy acceptance of traditional woman's work—accomplishments, education, duties—as the hallmark of an approved character, while making a woman's rejection of it a signal of her unwomanliness or immorality. Richardson's Sir Charles Grandison, for example, affords numerous instances when women's traditional duties are discussed in relation to their education. Harriet Byron, the heroine, was taught French and Italian as well as feminine virtues like "not to start subjects." Despite her observance of this modesty, she is assigned the task of debating the pedant Walden to whom she not only proves equal in intelligence, but also defends the world as a university since women are forbidden admittance to the formal university. However, Harriet's eloquence is carefully complemented by her cultivation of feminine crafts and housewifery, even when she becomes the wife of an extremely wealthy baronet. Miss Clements, a very learned lady in the same novel, wonders why knowledge, if it "makes a man shine, should make a woman vain and pragmatical," yet she too excels in housewifery (I, 69). In Richardson, approved characters universally uphold the right of women to be educated as ability and desire prompt them, but never at the expense of traditional women's work. Echoing The Ladies Calling, cited above, Richardson writes to a friend that a woman who despises domestic duties "is good for nothing."

Fanny Burney supports Richardson's view of the learned woman by her attack on the learned Mrs. Selwyn in Evelina, albeit her wit and repartee evoke a certain amount of silent admiration in the circumspect Evelina and mortify her male party—Burney firmly advocates more emphasis on modesty than agility in conversation. Evelina spends a good deal of her time in dressing her hair and attiring herself appropriately for the various social functions to which she is introduced (not surprisingly, for Fordyce devotes much of one of his first sermons to the subject of women's dress). She minds her table manners, learns the decorum of the
Ranelagh tea room, the Vauxhall gardens, the Bath parties, and practices the art of letter writing. In short, she becomes a lovely ornament, thereby earning herself a titled husband and exercising her moral virtue at the same time. In *Camilla*, Burney shifts the focus away from the cultivation of social graces and toward the development of the fine moral distinctions and domestic crafts in her heroine, though the results for Camilla are the same as for Evelina. While the beautiful Camilla devotes herself to morality, housekeeping, and needlework, her younger sister, physically handicapped as a result of a childhood fall and scarred from small pox, studies classical languages and literature which her family feels is appropriate since they consider her unmarriageable. To complete the paradigm, then, Camilla marries a moral paragon who is also a wealthy landed gentleman, while her sister is cruelly deceived by a fortune-hunting rake.

Tom Jones and Sir Charles Grandison associate women’s accomplishments with the marriage ideal by linking the accomplishment specifically to submission to male authority. The striking example is Sophia’s filial devotion to her much-inebriated, coarse, and violent father which she demonstrates by cheerfully playing over and over his favorite bawdy songs without ever becoming the least tainted by them. Sophia’s incorruptibility is directly linked with her ability to delight her father, be a dutiful daughter, and play the harpsichord. Her ornamental accomplishment is thus related to her submissiveness, her most admirable quality, according to Squire Allworthy, and that which makes her an ideal marriage partner. Even Sophia’s riding to hounds with Squire Western is adduced as an act of submission to please him because he likes to have her with him as much as possible; Sophia would rather read a book, since the sport is too rough for her. Allworthy apostrophizes her for this quality as “an inestimable Treasure to a good husband,” since “she always shewed the highest Deference to the Understandings of Men; a Quality, absolutely to the making a good Wife.”

Several of Richardson’s female characters protest the inequalities between men and women, but they find approval by finally submitting to male authority. Harriet Byron is incensed when Greville, one of her early suitors, attempts to exert control over her by following her to London. Later, as Lady Grandison, she commiserates with Clementina being bullied by her brothers into marrying, “as if she were not to have a will” (VI, 151), yet she chastizes Charlotte for calling her marital squabbles a “struggle for my dying liberty” (III, 390). Moreover, she entirely approves when a newly meek Charlotte turns over her personal kitty of fifteen hundred pounds to her husband as a symbol of her acquiescence to masculine authority. Finally, though offended when called upon to sing a song ridiculing the ability of women to remain constant, Harriet fulfills the request; she is one of Sophia’s sisterhood, after all.

The eighteenth-century ideal of women’s accomplishments as ornamental and synonymous with a high moral sense, purity, and passivity, undergoes a dramatic revaluation in the nineteenth-century novel. Austen, Thackeray, Bronte, Dickens, and Eliot all assail the value of ornamental accomplishments in order to redefine woman’s role in society. Austen objects to the purely ornamental education promoted by popular moralists and novelists alike on the basis of its indefensible intellectual vacuity. The great danger in the superficial education aimed at making women display objects lies in its contamination of the moral and intellectual training afforded women also. When Emma puts her slim talent for drawing to use as a matchmaking device for Mr. Elton and Harriet, she displays ignorance of her limitations as an artist and vanity in her understanding of other people’s feelings. Similarly, in *Pride and Prejudice*, Mary
Bennet’s musical performance embarrasses Elizabeth less for the eagerness of its display than for the affectation and conceit which it manifests. Mary’s intellectual pretensions are absurd, not because she represents the learned woman so derided in the eighteenth-century novel, but because, being deficient in understanding, she is reduced to shallow moralizing and half-understood quotation from old conduct books. Her display is little different from that of Miss Bingley who likes to walk about a room to show off her figure. Worse, the display of their slim talents has made these women vain.

The conversation at Netherfield about what constitutes female accomplishments contains the gist of Austen’s ideas on the subject. Bingley asserts that netting purses, covering screens, and painting tables show how accomplished young ladies are. Miss Bingley elaborates:

“...No one can be really esteemed accomplished, who does not greatly surpass what is usually met with. A woman must have a thorough knowledge of music, dancing, drawing, singing, and the modern languages to deserve the word; and besides all this, she must possess a certain something in her air and manner of walking, the tone of her voice, her address, and expressions, or the word will be but half deserved.”

All this she must possess,” added Darcy, “and to all this she must yet add something more substantial, in the improvement of her mind by extensive reading.”

I am no longer surprised at your knowing only six accomplished women. I rather wonder now at your knowing any.”

Elizabeth’s rejoinder is sometimes taken as an ironic confirmation that Miss Bingley’s definition of accomplishments is correct. Taking into consideration the qualifiers “thorough,” “a certain something,” “more substantial,” and “extensive,” Elizabeth’s irony must be seen first of all as a plea for reasonableness. She is not necessarily adverse to the basis on which the worldly judge sophistication, but her irony does imply a criticism of sophistication as being necessarily desirable.

Notably, the above quotation from Pride and Prejudice discusses the definition of “accomplishment” without association with virtue. Nor does Austen connect the degree of accomplishment in a young lady with her desirability as a marriage partner—the most accomplished ladies lose the hero as Mary Crawford and Caroline Bingley illustrate. In these ways, then, Austen departs radically from the way in which ornamental accomplishments are treated by earlier writers; however, this does not mean that she rejects the value of traditional women’s work. Austen satirizes the definitions offered by Bingley and his sister because of the narrow range and unintellectual nature of activities they accord women, but she does not attack the activities per se. Elizabeth Bennet takes up a piece of needlework as often as a book during evening hours at Netherfield when the conversation takes a frivolous turn. The needlework of Fanny Price, the nursing of the sick by Elizabeth Bennet and Anne Elliott, the babysitting of Jane Bennet and Anne Elliott, the household management of Emma Woodhouse and Elinor Dashwood, as well as the musical and artistic abilities of characters like Jane Fairfax all recommend the characters within the context of the novels. Austen is well aware that the daily requirements of the home must be met, and she accepts this as woman’s role.

Austen’s neutral presentation of ladies’ accomplishments is followed by Thackeray’s associating accomplishments with vice. In Vanity Fair, Thackeray develops a bifurcated Sophia Western in his dual anti-heroines, relegating Sophia’s liveliness to Becky Sharp and her submissiveness to Amelia Sedlely, then filling in the other half of the characterizations with egoism, vanity, vice, and shallowness. Becky and Amelia, like
Sophia, are musicians of sorts, but there the similarity ends. To Amelia, the piano gives pleasure to no one but herself. Significantly, the piano itself rather than any music she might produce on it interests Amelia, for she is convinced it is a gift from George. Thus Thackeray uses the paradigm from the eighteenth-century novel to reveal the vanity and folly of the character. The sentimental Amelia cannot perceive George’s indifference or that he would be incapable of such a generous gesture as retrieving her piano from the auction block. The piano becomes one of the items in her shrine to George’s memory that helps her avert a romantic involvement with Dobbin.

By contrast, Becky Sharp uses her accomplishments to secure social success. She capitulates Jos Sedley with sentimental love songs, later entertains gentleman callers at her soirees with her music, once moves Lady Steyne to tears by her rendering of the Mozart religious songs, and unsuccessfully tries to support herself by singing professionally. The best that can be said of Becky in these instances is that she manages her own destiny; she is active and resourceful on her own behalf. But Becky’s activity is as full of guile as that of the rest of Vanity Fair. Through her manipulations she provides for her little family “on nothing a year” while incurring little guilt and a great deal of debt. Ironically, of course, Becky’s conventional gentlewoman’s ornamental talents derive from her bohemian background which ordinarily would be a deterrent to her social goals. If the emptiness of ornamental education is satirized by Austen, Thackeray clearly links it to hypocrisy and immorality.

Thackeray also reverses the association of feminine accomplishments with the marriage ideal illustrated by Fielding. Sophia’s submissiveness is replaced by Becky’s preda-toriness and Amelia’s self-pitying manipulation. As a result, Becky stalks the innocent and decent Mr. Crisp as well as the preposterous collector of Boggley Wollah. That her values coincide with those of her society, however, is indicated by the fact that no one questions the latter match—Amelia is all sentimental flutter over the prospect; Mrs. Sedley regrets only the lowness of Becky’s parentage, and George interferes out of snobbery. In view of Becky’s goals, it is ironic that in marrying Rawdon she both secures a fairly compatible husband and fails to make an economically advantageous match. Amelia, on the other hand, ostensibly modest, submissive, and self-sacrificing, has two-edged virtues; their possessor is morally flaccid. That these virtues are counter-productive is nowhere so clearly revealed as when they manage to get her George Osborne for a husband.

While James Fordyce preaches needlework as a woman’s moral obligation and Jane Austen accepts it as a fact in woman’s life, Thackeray turns it into a display of hypocrisy and vanity. Whenever Becky wants to appear domestic, she applies herself to a dirty rag of a shirt she supposedly is sewing for little Rawdon. Amelia, on the other hand, assiduously cuts up all of her own clothing into clothes for little George. Becky’s lack of interest in her son is as extreme as Amelia’s smothering care of hers, and both attitudes are indicated by the abuse of a traditional woman’s craft. Thackeray also explodes Fordyce’s dictums about the moral and practical applications of drawing as a lady’s occupation. As an impoverished young widow, Amelia thinks of selling her art work as a livelihood. Not only is the market glutted with amateur art, but Amelia’s pathetic and childish pictures get no buyers. Her naivete about the value of her work soon turns into despair in her situation.

Dickens completes the dismantling of the old mythology regarding women’s accomplishments, and along with other Victorian novelists, revalues women’s crafts in relation to woman’s role in society. In David Copperfield, Dora, modeled after the eigh-
teenth-century ideal of the genteel lady with an ornamental education, exposes the impracticality of the ideal. Dora paints flowers while meals go unprepared, the servants pilfer from the larder, and Jip, her dog, wreaks havoc in the house. She uses her cookbook as a prop for one of Jip’s tricks and bursts into tears when David attempts a few lessons in household accounts. The "indispensable" handwriting recommended by Hester Chapone, proves equally useless to Dora who copies David’s manuscript by ending each page with her beautiful signature as if it were a school exercise. According to the old formulas for domestic order, the husband’s duty is to develop his wife’s abilities, but Dora is impervious to such help, subverting David’s remonstrances by her alternate affectionate cajolment and irrational outbursts. The old ideals for the conduct of life simply do not work in David Copperfield.

Instead, David slowly comes to understand that the sister-angel-helpmeet, Agnes, represents the new ideal. Significantly, she is more desirable because she is more useful; her domestic accomplishments make life comfortable. She flourishes in motherhood while Dora is killed by it. The description of Dora’s stillbirth is revealing: "I had hoped that lighter hands than mine would help to mold her character, and that a baby-smile upon her breast might change my child-wife into a woman. It was not to be." David is interested in the efficacy of motherhood as an improver of character, but "It was not to be." Dora dies a short time after her stillborn child.

David’s marriage to Agnes results in a redefinition of the feminine ideal. Romantic love, represented by David’s marriage to Dora, leads to the loss of sexual innocence which in turn proves to have destructive emotional and physical effects, so David "disciplines" his heart to prefer a non-sexual mother-woman like Agnes. Agnes is the reliable counsellor to whom David turns for advice from childhood through his courtship and marriage to Dora and years of loneliness and spiritual growth. Agnes, with her little basket of keys, her father’s competent housekeeper, becomes the preferred ideal. In David’s second marriage, the more private and self-centered aims are submerged in the public roles of spouse, parent, and worker, epitomizing the individual as a thoroughly useful member of society.

Being useful and doing useful work is crucial to the ideal which Agnes represents. While her domesticity and motherliness might at first seem to be little different from the eighteenth-century ideal suggested by the typical happy-ever-after ending of novels like Tom Jones and Sir Charles Grandison, there is a difference. In the earlier novels, the usefulness of women’s work ranks below the virtue with which it is performed—Lady Grandison’s feminine submission and sense of moral obligation to be efficient and economical in her housekeeping surpass the usefulness of the work which she actually performs. (the housekeeper seems to have kept up the grand establishment perfectly well for years before the arrival of Lady Grandison). However, in the work ethic promoted by Dickens and the other Victorian writers, characters actively respond to forces which affect their lives. To illustrate, when Agnes’ father has financial misfortune, she takes the initiative by starting a little school.

The values approved in David Copperfield parallel those promoted in Ruskin’s "Of Queen’s Gardens," a central document on Victorian values. In this essay, Ruskin considers what portion of "power" falls to women and what kind of education prepares them for the proper exercise of this power. He urges that "a girl’s education should be nearly, in its course and material of study, the same as a boy’s; but quite differently directed," and he criticizes bringing up girls "as if they were meant for sideboard ornaments." He does not intend that women seek knowledge for its own sake or even for their own, but rather that it will enable them "to understand, and even to aid, the work of men... but only to feel, and to judge" (sec.
Ruskin then applies this theory to the public and private duties of men and women:

Now, the man's work for his own home is, as has been said, to secure its maintenance, progress, and defence; the woman's to secure its order, comfort, and loveliness.

Expand both these functions. The man's duty, as a member of a commonwealth, is to assist in the maintenance, in the advance, in the defense of the state. The woman's duty, as a member of the commonwealth, is to assist in the ordering, in the comforting, and in the beautiful adornment of the state.

What the man is at his own gate, defending it, if need be, against insult and spoil, that also, . . . in a more devoted measure, he is to be at the gate of his country, leaving his home . . . to do his more incumbent work there.

And, in like manner, what the woman is to be within her gates, as the centre of order, the balm of distress, and the mirror of beauty: that she is also to be without her gates, where order is more difficult, distress more imminent, loveliness more rare.

(sect. 86)

Though the modern reader may find much to fault in Ruskin's views, from the Victorian standpoint they have revolutionary significance. In effect, Ruskin assigns a social and political value to traditional women's work, making it a corollary to man's role of protecting the family and contributing to the empire. His recommendation that boys and girls be given the same course of study, though to different depths, is more progressive than the eighteenth-century idea that the subjects suitable for study by men and women are mutually exclusive. Ruskin, at least in theory, maintains that woman has a duty to the state "without her gates," although he offers no specific examples of what this duty might include.

This revaluation of woman's role manifests itself in a number of ways in the treatment of woman's work in the nineteenth-century novel. Most striking is that the purely amateurish craft, whose chief purpose is to take up time, is repudiated in favor of professionalism and useful work. In Eliot's Middlemarch, Dorothea's failure in her social welfare schemes and attempts to participate in Casaubon's intellectual work are all the more poignant because she rejects the old-fashioned ladies' busy work:

. . . With some endowment of stupidity and conceit, she might have thought that a Christian young lady of fortune should find her ideal life in village charities, patronage of the humbler clergy, the perusal of "Female Scripture Characters," unfolding the private experience of Sara under the Old Dispensation, and Dorcas under the New, and the care of her soul over her embroidery in her own boudoir.¹⁴

Rejecting the shallow existence to be found in needlework and pious practices, Dorothea strives to overcome the disadvantages of her "toybox" education through her marriage to Casaubon. This bookish clergyman, she thinks, will open broad vistas of knowledge hitherto beyond her reach and allow her a substantive participation in his intellectual labors. However, her intelligence proves fatal even to her willingness to act as an amanuensis to her husband. Distrusted by Casaubon, disillusioned by the flaws in his "Key to All Mythologies," she suffers rebuff even in her attempts to offer him wisely consolation, affection, and understanding. Thus deprived of doing either useful work or providing psychological support to her husband, her relatives' advice that she spend her time riding and growing geraniums seems a mockery.

A strong argument for the readers who see Mary Garth as the feminine ideal in Middlemarch can be made of the fact that she, unlike Dorothea, succeeds at being useful. When necessity demands, Mary earns a living by doing needlework and nursing the sick. As a tribute to the ironies of life, Mary Garth writes children's books as an extension of her family life, while the large-gaolated Dorothea finally has only her domestic life. For Dorothea errs in her understanding of
the helpmeet role, expecting far too much from it. In perfect agreement with the description of a wife’s duties offered by Ruskin, both Lydgate and Casaubon expect their wives to be uncritically admiring of their work, but not to have any responsibility for its actual performance. What seems revolutionary in Ruskin is reactionary for Dorothea.

A second salient issue in relation to Mary Garth arises from her rejection of a teaching job in favor of remaining at home to help her overburdened mother. She agrees to take the job because of her family’s grim financial situation, but is overjoyed when her father regains his local position and receives lucrative employment, thus obviating her need to work for a living. A similar situation occurs in Jane Eyre when Jane, who has been doing an admirable job teaching girls in a rural school, closes the school and retires to her avocations of sketching, reading, and housekeeping, when she inherits a large sum of money. The actions of Mary and Jane align with the view that a genteel person does not work for a living, but at first sight appear at odds with more progressive ideas about women’s work. St. John Rivers’ criticism of Jane Eyre’s action says as much:

“It is all very well for the present,” said he: “but seriously, I trust that when the first flush of vivacity is over, you will look a little higher than domestic endearments and household joys.”

St. John is particularly interested in what Jane should consider her religious duty, to teach the ignorant and to become a missionary. Jane not only rejects his cold idealism, but finds real joy in renovating Moor House, studying, and reading with her cousins.

Anyone who knows the drudgery in a dull and unrewarding teaching position can sympathize with Mary Garth’s and Jane Eyre’s rejection of it. The portrait of school life and the teacher’s lot given in the first part of Jane Eyre and in Villette suggest that to Bronte teaching entails far more pain than joy. Moreover, the preference for domestic life by Jane and Mary indicates how limited their alternatives are as well as carrying a note of wish fulfillment. It is not only that Jane Eyre’s life at Moor House seems to include an imaginary redecorating of the Brontes’ Haworth parsonage and an idealization of life there, but also a longing for independence and the artist’s struggle to be free. The artist needs both time and freedom from stultifying demands in order to work. Jane’s allegorical pictures, her use of sketching as therapy in order to overcome her jealousy of Miss Ingram, and her skilful portraits reveal a commitment to her art, but she can only indulge it in moments stolen from her governess work and in the leisure of Moor House where she feels “a thrill of artist-delight” as she paints (373). So too, an aspiring novelist like Bronte might long to trade her teaching duties for a self-structured work routine.

Like Jane Eyre, Mary Garth rejects teaching because she dislikes it, but Eliot does not depict the alternative as idyllically as Jane’s. Mrs. Garth’s life, which Mary elects to ease, consists of a dawn-to-dusk multiplicity of chores and cares. Though Mrs. Garth cheerfully bakes pies, launders clothes by hand, and teaches her younger children their lessons all at the same time, her life is unenviable. Yet for Mary, a daughter’s duty and family happiness offer more personal satisfaction than she can find in school teaching. Woman’s traditional work has a positive value for her.

When traditional women’s work has merely an ornamental value, however, Eliot wastes no effort in defending it. Unlike Dorothea who has the author’s sympathy for endeavoring to make her life effective, Rosamund Vincy in Middlemarch and Gwendolyn Harleth in Daniel Deronda earn her censure for failing to recognize their limitations. For Rosamund, this means her assumption that her finishing at Mrs. Lemon’s school, even including the “extras, such as the getting in and out of a carriage” (I, 143) prepares her for the exigencies of
marriage. Marrying the nephew of a baronet "offered vistas of that middle-class heaven, rank" (I, 177), so great that she even discounts her own reservations about Lydgate's low-status medical profession and disgusting (to her) research. Having paid so much attention to furnishings and refinements, Rosamund responds predictably to Lydgate's revelation about their debts with "What can I do?" and with her attempts to subvert his professional goals by urging him to set up a fashionable practice in London.

Gwendolyn Harleth errrs in confusing the depth and purpose of her lady's training. The utter folly of her belief that she can dominate Grandcourt indicates how little intellectual acuity her education has given her, nor has it given her any practical skills. An over-rated sense of her personal worth and character strength leads her not only into a devastating marriage, but numerous smaller mistakes. When Gwendolyn thinks she can become a professional singer because she is a lady—which she assumes qualifies her for "a high position" on the stage—Herr Klesmer lectures her at length on the qualifications of a professional actress and singer, starting with the need for talent and years of dedicated training. After marrying, when Gwendolyn again thinks of taking singing lessons, Grandcourt scoffs at her motives and the likely result, that she will make a fool of herself by singing for her guests: "'Amateurs make fools of themselves. A lady can't risk herself in that way in company. And one doesn't want to hear squalling in private" (III, 65). The element of justice in this chastisement stings her all the more by coming from the odious Grandcourt as well as vivifies the criticism of ornamental education for making women superficial and naive.

Occasionally, however, amateurism can lead to professionalism. Such is the thesis offered by Anne Bronte in Tenant of Wildfell Hall, one of the first portraits of a woman artist. Though the focus of the novel is on the plight of the innocent wife of an incorrigible dissipate, Helen Huntingdon's professionalism is well marked. She determines to become an artist in order to support herself and her son and escape from her husband. First, she realizes, she "must labour hard to improve [her] talent and to produce something worthwhile as a specimen of [her] powers." She sets up her easel and works from morning to night until her husband destroys her work and prevents her from obtaining new materials. When he installs his mistress as his son's governess, she takes the bold step of decamping with her son, servant, and baggage. Then posing as the widowed Mrs. Graham, she sets up a studio at Wildfell Hall, turns out landscapes, secures a London agent, pays her debts, and wins the admiration of her friends and relatives. Left a wealthy widow after her husband's death, Mrs. Huntingdon apparently abandons her art for the management of her estate, but this suits Bronte's characterization too. Mrs. Huntingdon is a professional, whatever her occupation is.

A second, rare consideration of the professional woman artist occurs in Daniel Deronda. In this novel, Daniel's mother consciously chooses her profession and achieves great success as a singer. To do so, though, she has had to flaunt convention. Explaining the difficulty of being both a woman and an artist, she makes a passionate defense of her abandonment of her son, husband, marriage, and religion in order to pursue her art, partly because marriage was forced upon her by her parents. She argues for a need and right to be free, for her talent and aspirations are unconventional:

I was a great singer, and I acted as well as I sang. All the rest were poor beside me. Men followed me from one country to another. I was living a myriad of lives in one. I did not want a child.

(III, 123)

... you can never imagine what it is to have a man's force of genius in you, and yet to suffer the slavery of being a girl. To have a pattern cut out—"this is the Jewish woman; this is what you must be; this is what you are wanted
for; a woman’s heart must be of such a size and no larger, else it must be pressed small, like Chinese feet; her happiness is to be made as cakes are, by a fixed receipt."

(III, 131)

Eliot allows the character to speak for herself. Daniel makes no comment on the validity of his mother’s position. She has chosen her own life, defends it, accepts it; the reader may do the same. Eliot’s presentation of this character takes us far from Fordyce’s moralizing about needlework and music. If music be woman’s work, Eliot’s character implies, let it be work, and it will have value.

However, Eliot will not allow so simple an alternative as either to accept or reject the justice of the claims of Deronda’s mother. Instead, she offers the portrait of Mirah Cohen, who on the verge of brilliant success as a singer also, abandons her career for marriage to Daniel and dedication to Zionism. Beautiful, talented Mirah marries the hero and opts for the conventional life; beautiful, talented Mrs. Deronda opts for her profession and forfeits the conventional life. A parallel situation arises in Eliot’s earlier novel, Adam Bede, when Dinah gives up preaching after marrying Adam. In Eliot’s novels, the roles of professional artist and wife are mutually exclusive.

In fact, it is the rare Victorian novel which explores artistic endeavor as a means of livelihood. Instead, novelists prefer to use the commonplace activities of women to depict the position of women in society, the marriage ideal, and individual values. This preference may reflect the authors’ attempt to present a realistic picture of middle class life, in effect, to preserve an artifact of the popular novel. The Victorian novelists depart from the didacticism of the eighteenth-century novelists by dissociating the personal rectitude of their heroines from the degree of their attainment of ornamental accomplishments as when Dickens separates the romantic and conjugal ideal in Dora and Agnes. Victorians, aware of the vapidness to which eighteenth-century ornamental education can lead a woman, disapprove of women who view themselves as works of art.

Woman in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novel tends to be defined by and confined to her traditional crafts. From an historical perspective, the novel offers few happy or realistic alternatives to being an ornament, an accomplished lady, or a genteel housewife. The genteel women’s occupations which occur in novels, those of governness and school teacher, result in a dismal life joyfully traded at the earliest opportunity for those of wife or amateur artist. The artistic professions mentioned in the novels are those which grow out of women’s traditional accomplishments, but ironically, these professions offer one of the most difficult means to success: Who can assure the aspiring painter, novelist, actress, or musician a secure future? In reality, too, artistic professions are unlikely alternatives for they would undoubtedly result in a bohemian life outside the boundaries of the genteel characters who might be inclined to them. In the Victorian novel, women’s traditional work may be either an ideal or a limitation, but seems to be one from which there is no escape.

NOTES

1 Richard Allestree, The Ladies Calling (Oxford: Theater, 1673), Pt. II, i, 7. Further references are in the text.


3 Thomas Gisborne has a somewhat hostile tone as he chides women who complain that men and women are given unequal education; he divides women’s education into religious instruction and that “on the score of ornaments,” but concentrates largely on woman’s duty to provide for the needs of other family members in An Enquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex, 11th ed. (London: Cadell and Davies, 1816), pp. 10, 79, ff. Most conduct books, however, have a rather paternal tone.

4 James Fordyce, Sermons to Young Women, 2 vols. (London: Cadell, 1791), 1, 255 and 262. Further references are to this edition and are cited in the text.

5 Vindication of the Rights of Women (New York:
Without acknowledging his source, Villars uses Fordyce’s words on woman’s virtue in advice to Evelina in Fanny Burney’s Evelina (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1968), p. 164. Austen parodies the same advice in Pride and Prejudice when Mary moralizes on Lydia’s elopement. In Susan Ferrier’s Marriage, A Novel, Lady Juliana’s refusal to read Fordyce’s Sermons is one of many examples of her frivolity (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1971), p. 60.

E. g. Dr. John Gregory, A Father’s Legacy to His Daughters (1774; rpt. Boston: Dow, 1834), p. 23.


Selected Letters of Samuel Richardson, ed. John Carroll (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), p. 177. Moralists and novelists of the eighteenth century generally agree that women could be allowed to learn what men were taught if they had particular genius; however, the learned lady was supposed to conceal the fact of her learning and complement it with well-developed domestic skills. Cf. Lady Mary Wortley Montague cited in Robert Palfrey Utter and Gwendolyn Bridges Needham, Pamela’s Daughters (New York: Macmillan, 1957), pp. 29-30; Lord Chesterfield, Letters to His Son, ed. Oliver H. Leigh, 2 vols. (New York: Tudor, 1941), I, 107-108; Gregory, p. 20; Charlotte Smith, The Old Manor House (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1969), pp. 186-188.


“Of Queen’s Gardens,” in Sesame and Lilies (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1900), sec. 74 and 80. Further references are to sections and are noted in the text.


George Eliot, Daniel Deronda, Cabinet Ed., 3 vols. (Edinburgh and London: Blackwood, 1878), II, 375-398; Ch. 23. Further references are to this edition and are cited in the text.


The independence and decision of Helen Huntingdon should not be underestimated. The novel was written in 1848 when husbands had complete legal control over wives and children. When Dickens separated from his wife in the 1860’s, he maintained control of all of his property, keeping his home, his children, and his wife’s sister as housekeeper, while his wife was sent off to a small flat where all but her eldest son were forbidden to visit or correspond with her. See Edgar Johnson, Charles Dickens His Tragedy and Triumph, 2 vols. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1952), II, 918-926 and 1064.

Zelda Austen notes the consistency with which authors of autobiographical novels tend to cast their fictional selves as “something more commonplace than genius,” preferring to universalize themselves for the sake of realism; “Why Feminist Critics Are Angry with George Eliot,” College English, 37 (February, 1976), 553. In Literary Women, Ellen Moers argues that Mme. de Stael’s Corinne served as a model for several other nineteenth-century works about “the woman as genius”; (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1977), Ch. 9.

Nursing, a traditional woman’s task noted in the conduct books, practiced by various characters within the domestic setting (e.g. Anne Elliott in Persuasion and Agnes in David Copperfield), and professionalized by Florence Nightingale during the Crimean War, fails to be recognized by novelists as an occupational alternative for a heroine, probably because of the generally low status of the medical profession up to the end of the nineteenth century.