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# The home education of girls in the eighteenth-century novel: 'the pernicious effects of an improper education'

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This essay explores the relationship between theories of domestic pedagogy as articulated in eighteenth-century conduct books, and fictional representations of home education in novels of the period. The fictional discussions of domestic pedagogy interrogate eighteenth-century assumptions about the innate superiority of a domestic education for women. In so doing, they participate in a much wider eighteenth-century and Regency-period debate about the proper role of women in public life. In order to make the argument that a woman's education was vital to the public welfare of the nation, writers from Mary Wollstonecraft to Jane Austen shifted the grounds of the debate, making the previously private into a matter of public concern. Early eighteenth-century ideals of domestic education, which kept women firmly in the private sphere, therefore began to seem outdated.

Keywords: *novel; eighteenth century; conduct books; Jane Austen; home education*

Scenes of domestic education are ubiquitous in novels of all kinds in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. From the hotly politicised fiction of William Godwin to the domestic novels of Jane Austen, discussions of education frequently form the backdrop, and sometimes the central action, of novels of the period. In the last pages of Elizabeth Inchbald's *A Simple Story* (1791), for example, her readers are explicitly asked to judge between 'the pernicious effects of an improper education' and the likely results of 'A PROPER EDUCATION' (Inchbald, 1967 [1791], pp. 337–338). The generic fluidity of the early novel gave novelists the opportunity to recast philosophical and educational theory into fictional form, and allowed them to enter into the era's great cultural debates about the nature, purpose and role of education in the life of the individual and of the nation. As Sophia

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Woodley argues, the eighteenth-century debate over whether a public or private education was superior 'served as a site where major philosophical and political issues of the day could be contested' (Woodley, 2009, p. 21). Fiction writers of both sexes, and of all political, religious and class affiliations, wished to have their say, and they did so in many and various ways.

In this essay, I consider a survey of depictions of education in eighteenth-century and Regency novels, with a particular focus on the 1790s, arguing throughout that these representations should be read as part of a much wider debate about the role of women in the public life of the nation. Comparing these fictional representations to the theory articulated in a survey of some 40 eighteenth-century conduct books and works of educational theory (see References section for a full list of works consulted), I shall argue that the contradictions and ambivalence that characterise discussions of domestic education represent and indeed sometimes epitomise ambivalent attitudes towards the increasing fluidity of the boundaries between private and public spheres in the eighteenth century. My choice of texts deliberately includes writers from the beginning of the 'long' eighteenth century to the end of the Regency period (covering the period 1660–1830), and takes account of writers from across the political spectrum, and the gamut of religious affiliations, to provide as wide a survey as possible. As Michèle Cohen points out, 'the history of education is central to an understanding of the positioning of males and females as gendered beings since the Enlightenment' (Cohen, 2004, p. 15). It is equally true that an understanding of eighteenth-century anxieties over gender roles is central to an understanding of the history of education.

Much educational theory of the eighteenth century and Regency periods appears in conduct books, particularly conduct books written for women. These works engage strongly with the educational theories propounded by Locke and Rousseau, and they attempt to educate readers into virtue. Conduct books, as Nancy Armstrong rightly points out, 'presented—in actuality, still present—readers with ideology in its most powerful form' (Armstrong, 1987, p. 97). A careful examination of the conduct literature written for women of the eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries therefore reminds us of the matters of pressing concern to eighteenth-century and Romantic-period readers and writers. Conduct books, as Barbara Zaczek suggests, 'attempt to solve the conflict between a real life and an ideal', being 'designed to replace the existing set of values with a new one and turn the reality into the desired model' (Zaczek, 1997, p. 29), and hence their discussions about education can helpfully identify for us both existing values, and various attempts to solve perceived problems. The debates most commonly canvassed in conduct literature are as follows: the relative value of a public or private education; the dubious value of ornamental 'accomplishments'; the role and purpose of reading; the dangers of excessive emotion or 'feeling'; 'free-thinking' *versus* religious authority; the role of reason in religion; how to inculcate moral principles; the perils and charms of the fashionable life; and, more broadly, the proper occupations for women.

It is clear that many writers of conduct literature were participating in a vigorous and often heartfelt debate about female education, the outcome of which, they

believed, would affect the very future of the nation. As early as 1695, Mary Astell proposed a proper Christian education as the best way to combat 'the degeneracy of the present Age' (Astell, 1695, p. 110). Nearly 100 years later, Mary Wollstonecraft's proposed 'revolution in female manners', had the same impetus, being based on the idea that women should 'labour by reforming themselves, to reform the world' (Wollstonecraft, 1992 [1792], p. 113). The publication of Rousseau's *Emile* in 1762 prompted a large number of women to write books on girls' education which drew on their own experience of educating children in the home to counter Rousseau's narrative of Sophie's education (Rousseau, 1913 [1762]). And, as Rebecca Davies argues, appeals to this specifically maternal authority allowed such women into the public sphere as professional writers, thus complicating the gender ideologies that the books seem to endorse (Davies, 2014).

It is a truism in most of the conduct literature of the early part of the century that girls should be educated in the home, under the careful supervision of parents as well as governesses (Mary Astell (1695) and Bathsua Makin (2002 [1673]) do favour female schools in the late seventeenth century, but they are unusual in so doing). As Davies points out, it was an 'eighteenth-century expectation that mothers foster intellectual growth in children' (Davies, 2014, p. 1). This attitude is based on an assumption that seclusion from the world will guarantee a more virtuous character, and that mothers are the most appropriate educators of children because they will supervise their moral, religious and social education most carefully. This view is articulated most clearly in Vicesimus Knox's *Liberal Education* (1781). Indeed, much early eighteenth-century advice literature simply takes for granted that the class of young women who will be educated at all will be educated at home. In John Essex's *The Ladies Conduct; or, Rules for Education* of 1722, for example, Essex compares the education of girls favourably to that of boys, suggesting that 'much is owing to the Pride and Stubbornness of [boys'] Tempers; many Faults in their School Education; and their too early going Abroad into the World', while 'the training up of Daughters is more agreeable and easy', because it happens at home (Essex, 1722, p. 2). Alexander Monro's *The Professor's Daughter. An Essay on Female Conduct* (1739–1745) lays out the content of such an education:

> Girls of your Station are generally taught Reading, Writing, Arithmetick, Dancing, Musick, S[e]wing with all the other Parts of what is called Women's work, Dressing, Repetitions of some pious Performances, and then generally without being desired you study Poems Plays Novels and Romances. To these I wou'd add some Languages besides that of the Country Mercating [marketing], Book keeping, Designing, Geography, History, Good Manners, natural Religion, reveal'd Religion. (Monro, 1996, p. 9)

Those writers who wished to define and promote virtuous female conduct assumed that mothers (and, to a far lesser degree, fathers), assisted by governesses and visiting masters, would take responsibility for the education of their daughters, and that education would take place as conversations, or lessons, in the home. As late as 1787, John Bennett could suggest that the 'famous question about a public or private education' had never been raised in relation to girls, although it had of course

dominated discourse about boys' education for several years by then (Bennett, 1787, p. 138). An anti-schools prejudice was common well into the 1790s and beyond—Thomas Gisborne prefers 'the domestic plan of education for the female sex' on the grounds that it is impossible to guard against 'the pernicious society of those who are not so well principled as themselves' at a boarding school, and that emulation of her peers may lead a girl into the sins of envy and avarice (Gisborne, 1996 [1797], p. 57). Characteristically oppositional, Mary Wollstonecraft set herself against the prevailing assumption of the superiority of a domestic education, when she writes that 'I do not believe that a private education can work the wonders which some sanguine writers have attributed to it' (Wollstonecraft, 1992 [1792], p. 86). Figure 1 demonstrates the perception that schools might even lead girls into the path of sexual ruin, while in Figure 2 we see an idealised version of the domestic education that functions as the explicit and implicit opposite of the criticisms of schools, where a mother fondly instructs her own child.

Schools for young women are stigmatised as promoting exterior 'accomplishments' or 'acquirements' (singing, dancing, playing the piano, speaking Italian) at the expense of internal virtue, and criticised for their emphasis on external manners, rather than internal spiritual growth. John Bennett notes austerely that '[t]he education of women is unfortunately directed rather to such accomplishments, as will enable them to make a noise and sparkle in the world, than to those qualities, which might insure their comfort here, and happiness hereafter' (Bennett, 1789, vol. 1, p. 6), while Hannah More bemoans the way 'our daughters' are educated 'for the transient period of youth', asking, 'Do we not educate them for a crowd, forgetting that they are to live at home? for the world, and not for themselves? for show, and not for use?' (More, 1801 [1799], vol. 1, p. 72). Hester Chapone tells her young (fictional) correspondent that the 'chief of her accomplishments' will be 'a competent share of reading, well-chosen and properly regulated', and that her 'chief delight' will be in 'those persons and those books from which you can learn true wisdom' (Chapone, 1996 [1773], pp. 187, 6). Indeed, the writers of conduct books, whatever their political and religious motivation, unite against both schools and 'accomplishments' to an extent that suggests they are being used as the scapegoats for something else: perhaps an indeterminate sense that female display of any kind could pose a challenge to accepted norms of female behaviour. Both the explicit criticisms of schools in conduct books, and the criticisms of 'accomplishments' are therefore part of the same broader debate: that of the place of women in the public sphere. In privileging the domestic over the world, private over public, internal over external, these writers reveal pressing eighteenth-century anxieties about the ways in which women—including the very women who wrote educational manuals—were beginning to transgress the boundaries between the private and public spheres.

Thus the vigour of the debate surrounding female education was at least partly generated by uncertainty and fears over changing norms and standards of female behaviour. By the late eighteenth century, two Jacobite revolutions (of 1715 and 1745) and the American War of Independence had shaken up the British governing


Figure 1. *A Boarding School Miss taking an Evening Lesson!!* (1831) Lewis Walpole Library MS 831.00.00.34+. Courtesy of The Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University

classes, and in the unsettled years before and immediately after the French Revolution, revolutionary radical ideas demanded the serious attention, not only of politicians and intellectuals, but of many women of the literate classes. Family dynamics were changing; literacy (and particularly female literacy) was rising, middle class women had more leisure than ever before, and new ideas could be disseminated


Figure 2. *Education* Lewis Walpole Library, MS 49 3588 v. 2 Folio. Courtesy of The Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University

through the newspapers, periodical press and circulating libraries.[1] Politically radical writers had the opportunity of reaching a literate female audience, and politically conservative writers faced the challenges of refuting a tide of radical and revolutionary ideas. Linda Colley and others have suggested that an ideology of separate sexual spheres was being 'increasingly prescribed in theory, yet increasingly broken through in practice', in the half century after the American war (Colley, 1992, p. 250). Conservative moralists thus perceived the domestic ideal as under threat, not just from revolutionary ideas, but from the common practice of the nation's wives and mothers. While Mary Wollstonecraft and the circle around her future husband William Godwin posited a new version of femininity based on the idea that women, like men, are primarily rational creatures, conservative writers felt the need to reiterate their vision of femininity, stressing that men and women are

fundamentally different, and thus that the rules that govern the conduct of women should be different to those that apply to men. Whereas men should 'plunge into business' (Gregory, 1795 [1761], p. 21), for example, '[d]omestic qualifications' are 'confessedly the highest point of usefulness' in the female sex (Bennett, 1789, vol. 1, p. 6). Given that claims of maternal authority based on their role as domestic educators had given women a voice in the public sphere of print culture, it is perhaps not surprising that debates over gender roles so frequently appear as scenes of domestic education in the novels of the period.

The stereotypes about the shallowness and pernicious nature of boarding-school education, and hence the superiority of its opposite—a domestic education—represented in Figures 1 and 2 appear equally frequently in novels. In Inchbald's *A Simple Story*, for example, we hear that the heroine Miss Milner was

> consigned […] to a Protestant boarding-school, from whence she was sent with merely such sentiments of religion, as young ladies of fashion mostly imbibe. Her little heart employed in all the endless pursuits of personal accomplishment had left her mind without one ornament, except those which nature gave, and even they were not wholly preserved from the ravages made by its rival, *Art*. (Inchbald, 1967 [1791], pp. 4–5)

The 'merely' and 'mostly' in this brief extract clearly reveal common perceptions of fashionable boarding schools in the 1790s, as well as Inchbald's own pro-Catholic agenda. In Mary Hays's *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* (1796), the heroine finds herself miserable at her boarding school, 'consigned, with my companions, to ignorant, splenetic, teachers, who encouraged not my emulations, and who sported with the acuteness of my sensations' (Hays, 1996 [1796], p. 16). The focus in both texts is on the 'ignorance' encountered in boarding establishments, as well as the harm done to impressionable young women by such ignorance. In Jane Austen's *Emma* (1815), Austen tells her readers a great deal about the reputation of most boarding schools through her description of Mrs Goddard's school:

> Mrs. Goddard was the mistress of a School—not of a seminary, or an establishment, or any thing which professed, in long sentences of refined nonsense, to combine liberal acquirements with elegant morality upon new principles and new systems—and where young ladies for enormous pay might be screwed out of health and into vanity—but a real, honest, old-fashioned Boarding-school, where a reasonable quantity of accomplishments were sold at a reasonable price, and where girls might be sent to be out of the way and scramble themselves into a little education, without any danger of coming back prodigies. Mrs. Goddard's school was in high repute—and very deservedly; for Highbury was reckoned a particularly healthy spot: she had an ample house and garden, gave the children plenty of wholesome food, let them run about a great deal in the summer, and in winter dressed their chilblains with her own hands. It was no wonder that a train of twenty young couple now walked after her to church. (Austen, 2005 [1815], p. 21)

Unlike the fashionable 'seminaries' or 'establishments' depicted in Figure 1, Mrs Goddard's school is one where children remain healthy, and do not learn decorative accomplishments at the expense of real lessons. Nonetheless, Austen's depiction of even a 'real, honest, old-fashioned Boarding-school' is not entirely positive, since the children must merely 'scramble themselves into' an education,

and have no guarantee that they will actually learn anything that will be of use to them in their lives. Again, ignorance is foregrounded, and the commercial imperatives that prioritised financial profit at the expense of real education are revealed. These criticisms of schools suggest that a prevailing belief in the value of domestic education still continued, well into the Regency period.

As in the conduct literature, the disapproval of 'accomplishments' is ubiquitous in fiction of the long eighteenth century, and is nicely illustrated by this conversation from Eliza Haywood's *The History of Miss Betsy Thoughtless* (1751). Mr Goodman, Betsy's guardian, commends Betsy to Alderman Saving as a daughter-in-law, saying that Betsy is 'of a good family, had a very pretty fortune of her own, and suitable accomplishments'. Saving replies:

> … A good family! Very pleasant i'faith. Will a good family go to market?—will it buy a joint of mutton at the butcher's?—Or a pretty gown at the mercer's? Then, a pretty fortune you say;—enough it may be to squander away at cards and masquerades, for a month or two. She has suitable accomplishments too;—yes, indeed, they are suitable ones, I believe:—I suppose she can sing, dance, and jabber a little French; but I'll be hanged if she knows how to make a pye, or a pudding, or to teach her maid to do it. (Haywood, 1997 [1751], p. 32)

Alderman Saving is, of course, a caricature, but his comments echo many others, made by more admirable characters in other novels, and, indeed, even chime with Austen's comments about Miss Goddard's school. His comments reflect his belief that a woman's proper role is to manage her household economically and effectively, and also reveal his dislike of women's increasing involvement in the public sphere. Such sentiments were not unusual.

It might therefore appear that novelists wholeheartedly endorse the same kinds of attitudes that we have seen in conduct books. But novels also problematise the idea that a domestic education is necessarily better for girls. In Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* (1722), the titular heroine receives an exemplary domestic education for a working-class woman, learning to be 'housewifely and clean', to be an excellent needlewoman, and to be 'very mannerly, and with good behaviour' (Defoe, 2004 [1722], p. 15). Indeed, when she is adopted into a gentry-class family, the narrator tells us that she receives 'all the advantages' of a gentlewoman's education, learning to dance, to speak French, to write, to sing and to play the harpsichord (p. 18). But Moll's education, instead of arming her with virtue and thus strengthening her against the various temptations of the world, makes her vain, and hence sows the seeds of her almost-immediate seduction by the elder son of the family, and her subsequent career of prostitution and theft. We can read this as a class-based criticism; there is indeed a strong sense that in raising Moll above her original milieu, in which she is industrious and honest, the gentlewoman who adopts her also ruins her. But we could also see this as reflecting a broader ambivalence about the benefits of educating women at home. Although commentators of the early eighteenth century almost universally agree that the family circle was the only safe place for a woman to receive her education, keeping her safe from the contagions of school,

Moll's story suggests that, in fact, even the domestic hearth and home may be rendered unsafe by education.

While, as in Betsy Thoughtless's case, fashionable accomplishments are very often considered to be the preserve of boarding schools, this is not always so, as we will see in the discussion of Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814). And, by the end of the eighteenth century, although stereotypes of boarding schools were still frequently used as a shorthand for a facile and worthless education, writers of fiction were also beginning to question the unthinking assumption that a domestic education necessarily equipped a girl well for life in the wider world. Frances Burney's *Evelina* (1778) deals almost entirely with this theme—Evelina's innate goodness keeps her safe in the world as she enters it, but she is frequently disconcerted, discomforted and even hurt by her failures to understand the customs and practices of polite society. As her guardian Mr Villars himself notes, although he himself was the one who decided that she should receive a rural education and be kept strictly from the metropolitan world, 'Alas, my child, the artlessness of your nature, and the simplicity of your education, alike unfit you for the thorny paths of the great and busy world …' (Burney, 2000 [1778], p. 223). It is clear that secluded retirement from the world, however excellent the education one may receive there may be, is a poor preparation for the real world of the eighteenth-century marriage market. Writers of fiction are thus pointing out the potential inconsistencies in the advice literature, which recommends that daughters should be kept entirely safe within the domestic sphere from any potentially corrupting influence, because an education which maintains their innocence and purity will make them more marriageable. As the fiction demonstrates, in fact the very innocence and purity that makes them attractive also makes them more vulnerable to rakes, fortune-hunters and unscrupulous men of all kinds.

Charlotte Lennox's *Female Quixote* (1752) makes the point about the dangers of rural seclusion through a different set of examples from Burney's. Its heroine, Arabella, has an excessive fondness for the romances that she finds in her reclusive father's library. Because she is never exposed to any countermanding influences, she takes these romances entirely seriously and literally, with very comical effects. 'Her Ideas, from the Manner of her Life, and the Objects around her, had taken a romantic Turn; and, supposing Romances were real Pictures of Life, from them she drew all her Notions and Expectations' (Lennox, 2008 [1752], p. 7). After a series of increasingly unfortunate adventures, Arabella is finally persuaded to give up her absurd 'Notions and Expectations' by Doctor——, who tells her:

> You have yet had little Opportunity of knowing the Ways of Mankind, which cannot be learned but from Experience, and of which the highest Understanding, and the lowest, must enter the World in equal Ignorance. I have lived long in a public Character, and have thought it my Duty to study those whom I have undertaken to admonish or instruct. (p. 379)

While a woman certainly would not wish to have a 'public Character', Lennox's implication is clear: some experience of the world is advisable, even necessary for a

young woman. But too much knowledge of the world is not, as is evident in the portrayal of Mary Crawford in Austen's *Mansfield Park*, where Mary's worldly acceptance of Maria and Henry's adultery shocks Edmund so profoundly that he cannot then even consider loving her again.

In addition to the issue of 'worldly knowledge', Jane Austen also revisits the question of accomplishments in *Mansfield Park*. Maria and Julia Bertram are educated at home by a governess. When their cousin Fanny arrives from Portsmouth, they unkindly despise her precisely because she lacks the surface accomplishments that they have been taught to prize. She cannot speak French, has only two sashes, and cannot play the piano. Austen's comic list of the eclectic knowledge that Maria and Julia consider essential—'the difference between water-colours and crayons […] the chronological order of the kings of England, with the dates of their accession, and most of the principal events of their reigns […] the Roman emperors as low as Severus; besides a great deal of the Heathen Mythology, and all the Metals, Semi-Metals, Planets, and distinguished philosophers'—nicely illustrates the governess Miss Lee's failure to inculcate really useful moral and spiritual knowledge, and her focus on the superficial (Austen, 2005 [1814], pp. 20–21). We see here, then, that domestic education does not necessarily guard against the faults of privileging the external over the internal, as the conduct books suggest. As the novel progresses, it becomes clear that Maria and Julia's surface polish is actually positively harmful to them, since it allows them to *appear* good, while actually remaining selfish and vain:

> The Miss Bertrams were now fully established among the belles of the neighbourhood; and as they joined to beauty and brilliant acquirements a manner naturally easy, and carefully formed to general civility and obligingness, they possessed its favour as well as its admiration. Their vanity was in such good order that they seemed to be quite free from it, and gave themselves no airs; while the praises attending such behaviour, secured and brought round by their aunt, served to strengthen them in believing they had no faults. (p. 40)

Austen thus goes further than many other writers in figuring accomplishments not simply as pointless, but as actively destructive. Austen's *Mansfield Park* is, in fact, a particularly sustained intervention into the debates about the status of a domestic education, challenging a number of the assumptions made about its superiority. Maria, Julia and Fanny are all educated at home, by a governess. Lady Bertram, who technically has the main charge of their education, devolves it to Miss Lee and Mrs Norris. This is an error often commented on in conduct literature. Hannah More writes, for example, in her *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education* (1799):

> Hired teachers are also under a disadvantage resembling tenants at rack-rent; it is their interest to bring in an immediate revenue of praise and profit, and, for the sake of a present rich crop, those who are not strictly conscientious, do not care how much the ground is impoverished for future produce. But parents, who are the lords of the soil, must look to permanent value, and to continued fruitfulness. (More, 1801 [1799], vol. 1, p. 97)[2]

Professional teachers are thus represented as being overly motivated by self-interest, while parents are described as having much more serious and virtuous motivations. Austen clearly agrees with the conduct literature here; in *Mansfield Park*, the total abnegation of responsibility by Maria and Julia's mother has bad consequences. Maria and Julia are petted and flattered by their aunt, they learn superficial accomplishments but fail to acquire humility, compassion, kindness or principle. Towards the end of the novel, their father, Sir Thomas, comes to realise that he has failed his daughters. As in *A Simple Story*, readers are asked to reflect on what constitutes 'a proper education' and Austen dedicates quite some time to this:

> [Sir Thomas] saw how ill he had judged, in expecting to counteract what was wrong in Mrs. Norris by its reverse in himself; clearly saw that he had but increased the evil by teaching them to repress their spirits in his presence so as to make their real disposition unknown to him […]
>
> Here had been grievous mismanagement; but, bad as it was, he gradually grew to feel that it had not been the most direful mistake in his plan of education. Something must have been wanting *within*, or time would have worn away much of its ill effect. He feared that principle, active principle, had been wanting; that they had never been properly taught to govern their inclinations and tempers by that sense of duty which can alone suffice. They had been instructed theoretically in their religion, but never required to bring it into daily practice. To be distinguished for elegance and accomplishments, the authorised object of their youth, could have had no useful influence that way, no moral effect on the mind. He had meant them to be good, but his cares had been directed to the understanding and manners, not the disposition; and of the necessity of self-denial and humility, he feared they had never heard from any lips that could profit them.
>
> […] Wretchedly did he feel, that with all the cost and care of an anxious and expensive education, he had brought up his daughters without their understanding their first duties, or his being acquainted with their character and temper. (Austen, 2005 [1814], pp. 535–536)

In this long passage, Austen clearly shows her readers that even 'an anxious and expensive' domestic education does not necessarily give a woman all she might need to live a virtuous moral life in the world as it is currently constituted: 'Something must have been wanting *within*'. On one level, this is a straightforward criticism of an 'authorised' education directed at forming external manners instead of internal principle—it is simply an extension of the criticism of 'accomplishments' education. But there is more to this passage than first meets the eye. Sir Thomas blames himself, but there is a strong suggestion, too, that children can be deceitful —Maria and Julia swiftly learn to act; to show Sir Thomas what he wishes to see, rather than being transparent and truthful. Austen therefore shows us that mere seclusion from the 'world' does not guarantee innocence and purity of mind.

This passage also reminds us of the disciplinary functions of education; the need to 'govern' and 'require' if students are to learn, thus opposing itself to Rousseau's popular doctrine of natural learning. Elsewhere in *Mansfield Park* this is made explicit in an even bleaker vision of how human beings learn best:

> [Tom] was the better for ever for his illness. He had suffered, and he had learned to think: two advantages that he had never known before; […] He became what he ought to be: useful to his father, steady and quiet, and not living merely for himself. (p. 534)

Austen's view that suffering is an 'advantage' may strike us as callous, but the idea that it is a necessary part of education is not that unusual in the period. Mary Brunton also suggests in *Discipline* (1814) that 'the iron grasp of adversity' trains the mind in ways that a gentler domestic education cannot:

> If to such culture as this I owed the seeds of my besetting sins [pride and wilfulness], at least, it must be owned that the soil was propitious, for the bitter root spread with disastrous vigour; striking so deep, that the iron grasp of adversity, the giant strength of awakened conscience, have failed to tear it wholly from the heart, though they have crushed its outward luxuriance. (Brunton, 1986 [1814], p. 4)

And suffering is, of course, what differentiates Lady Matilda from her mother, Miss Milner, in *A Simple Story*:

> Educated in the school of adversity, and inured to retirement from her infancy, she had acquired a taste for all those amusements which a recluse life affords.—She was fond of walking and riding—was accomplished in the arts of music and drawing, by the most careful instructions of her mother—and as a scholar she excelled most of her sex, from the great pains Sandford had taken with that part of her education, and the great abilities he possessed for the task. (Inchbald, 1967 [1791], p. 221)

It is hard to reconcile the notion that 'adversity' is the 'school' that best allows a woman to excel that so frequently reoccurs in such novels, with the simultaneous insistent emphasis on protecting children and young women from the pernicious influences of the outside world, and the eighteenth-century assumption that girls would be best educated at home.[3] Through such commentaries on domestic education, therefore, writers like Brunton, Inchbald and Austen covertly suggest that in fact women must have a place in the public or external sphere if they are to develop the characters of moral worth that are so essential to the safety and security of the nation, and the education of future generations.[4]

In 1799, Hannah More, advocating 'a patriotism at once firm and feminine' exhorts the women of Britain, by amending their own morals and manners, 'to come forward and contribute their full and fair proportion towards the saving of their country' (More, 1801 [1799], vol. 1, p. 4 ). After reading history, Jane West suggests, women will 'rise from the perusal with a virtuous determination not to accelerate the ruin of our country' (West, 1996 [1811], p. 428). If a woman's moral taste is created and developed by what she reads, as West and others suggest, in periods of rising doubt and insecurity, the ways in which she is educated must therefore come under greater scrutiny. And if we take seriously the argument that the future of the nation lies in educating its women (an argument used by every writer of conduct books that I have cited), then that education takes on a new importance. What is at stake is thus not just a contested ideal of femininity, but a hope that a new generation of women, their taste formed by reading that is 'well-chosen and properly regulated' (Chapone, 1996 [1773], p. 187), to use Hester

Chapone's phrase, will reconstruct the morals and manners of the nation of England. As Jacques du Boscq wrote, more than a century earlier, 'I cannot chuse but think, that the Glory and Worth, and Happiness of any Nation depends as much upon [Women] as upon the Men' (du Boscq, 2002 [1632], p. 16). The fictions discussed here certainly do not all subscribe to this idea, but they do participate in a number of discussions related to it, as we have seen. For Austen, Haywood, Burney, Inchbald, Brunton, Wollstonecraft and Hays, as well as for Defoe, the many questions surrounding the role of women in the nation could be most satisfactorily worked out in fiction. 'Education' becomes a convenient floating signifier in these novels, deployed in ways that reflect a much broader concern about women's changing roles in the public and private spheres. The contradictions and complexities of the home/school debates over education should thus be seen as an extension of the contradictory attitudes that simultaneously extolled the importance of women as the mothers and educators of the nation and denied them any real access to political power.

Fictional discussions of domestic pedagogy thus interrogate the early eighteenth-century assumption that only a domestic education could properly prepare a woman for matrimony, or indeed for her future life. They enter vigorously into the question of what an accomplished woman might look like. They expose the inconsistencies in the arguments for a wholly private domestic education, just as they make fictional capital of the limitations of a public, or boarding-school education. In order to make the argument that a woman's education was vital to the public welfare of the nation, writers from Mary Wollstonecraft to Jane Austen were shifting the grounds of the debate, making the previously private into a matter of public concern. In so doing, the early eighteenth-century ideals of domestic education, which kept women firmly in the private sphere, began to seem outdated.

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## Notes

1. For a full discussion of the ways in which the new 'sentimental family' developed during the period, see Caroline Gonda, *Reading Daughters' Fiction 1709–1834* (1996), and Linda Colley's discussion of the role played by women in public life in *Britons* (1992, pp. 237–280). See also William St Clair's *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (2004) for a discussion of the dissemination of texts.

2. The dangers of giving an inappropriate person control of a child's mind is discussed or illustrated in a number of earlier novels, perhaps most famously in Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* (1749), in which the opposing philosophies and practice of Tom Jones' tutors Thwackum and Square are directly harmful to Tom's intellectual and moral development. Similarly, in *Betsy Thoughtless*, being removed from a harmful boarding school is a mixed blessing for Betsy—her new guardian, Lady Mellasin, is 'a very unfit person to have the care of youth, especially those of her own sex' (Haywood, 1997 [1751], p. 17).
3. A Christian emphasis on the necessity for battling against sin is no doubt at work here, but this does not seem enough to me to explain these scenes in their entirety.
4. In addition, such plots provide validation for fiction writers struggling to make the case for the respectability and moral worth of the new genre of the novel, who can argue that by an act of imaginative sympathy, a young woman can learn the lessons of suffering through reading, rather than through experience. Many of the justifications of fiction of the eighteenth century rely on an implicit or explicit appeal to this logic, and both the multitudes of suffering heroines in eighteenth-century fiction (of whom the most famous is surely Samuel Richardson's Clarissa Harlowe), and the very structures of the form bear tribute to its power. Such discussions of the importance of adversity in education thus play their part not only in debates over education, but in the ideological coding of the novel genre itself.

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