

CHAPTER IV

LITERARY CANVAS OF WOMEN EDUCATION

The late 18th and early 19th centuries saw fierce debates about the nature and purpose of women's education. Professor Kathryn Sutherland assesses these debates and describes the education and reading practices of Jane Austen and her female characters. Jane Austen and her elder sister Cassandra both attended schools: briefly in Oxford and Southampton in 1783; for a slightly longer period the Abbey House, Reading, a boarding school for daughters of the clergy and minor gentry, in 1785-6, when Jane was 10. But most of their education was undertaken privately at home, where their father, Reverend George Austen, supplemented his clerical income by taking boy pupils as boarders. It is likely that the Austen sisters benefited from their father's library and from his informal instruction. We do not know whether or not they also sat in on any of the boys' classes. At the Abbey House the curriculum included writing, spelling, French, history, geography, needlework, drawing, music and dancing. While two of her brothers would go on to take degrees at Oxford University and another would complete his education with a four-year Grand Tour of Europe, Jane Austen and her sister, like all other women of the time, even those of their social background (the gentry and upper middle classes), had little formal education, no admittance to university or to a career, and no opportunity for independent travel.

Condemning the limits of women's education

During Jane Austen's lifetime the limited nature of women's opportunities to learn was the subject of lively debate among female educationalists. Writers with otherwise opposing political views, like Catharine Macaulay, Marry Wollstonecraft, Anna Laetitia Barbauld, Hester Chapone and Hannah More, were united in their condemnation of the narrow limits of female education. In *Letters on Education* (1790), the radical Macaulay advised parents, 'Confine not the education of your daughters to what is regarded as the ornamental parts of it'. By 'ornamental parts' she meant drawing, music, a smattering of French and Italian, just enough to attract a husband, but not intimidate him and to offer some refuge from boredom in leisure hours. But equally, the more conservative Chapone argued for a disciplined and regulated course of reading that went deeper than mere fashion and accomplishment, writing: 'The principal study, I would recommend, is *history*. I know of nothing equally proper to entertain and

improve at the same time, or that is so likely to form and strengthen your judgment’.

"Improvement of mind" is in fact so important to Jane Austen that in considering how girls should be educated she also shows her ideas. In spite of the physical attraction, almost all of her heroines are deficient in the superficial virtues. Elizabeth Bennet and Emma Woodhouse both neglect their piano practice and hence are no more than moderate performers. Yet none of them is called upon to improve in these areas. Their education is complete so far as Jane Austen is concerned once they have corrected certain failings in judgment and/or feeling. The education in personality is more than the education of appearance. The improvement of mind should be the final purpose of education.

Blending literary notion with educating women

The poet Cowper, satirizing the degeneracy of his age, and striving to set forth in impressive climax the several follies of the world around him, reserves for a final and conclusive touch this withering couplet, beyond which the force of satire could no further go:

While learning, once the man's exclusive pride,

Seems verging fast towards the female side.

Thus does the poet, intending a sneer, build better than he knows, and give us a text that seems a prophecy. Dependent all his life upon the tender offices of women, and requiting this tenderness in the most touching verse; elevated by all his instincts and his weaknesses, as well as by his intellectual insight, above the possibility of holding the Miltonic view of woman, Cowper yet found it surpassingly ridiculous that woman should take to what he calls "learning." This was the eighteenth century way of looking at female education. Since the inmates of that now bleak looking house in Olney village stirred the fire on a winter evening, closed the shutters fast, let fall the curtains and wheeled the sofa round, a wonderful century has elapsed, in which the world has changed as never before in a similar period, and the thoughts of men have broadened with conceptions never dreamed by other generations. Nineteenth century self laudation is a much worn theme, now profitless and useless; and I enter upon it only to suggest the query whether our astonishing hundred years has anything to show in social development more astonishing than the new ideas, with which we are now so familiar that they have become already almost commonplace,

concerning the sphere, the capacities, the rights, the education, of women. The pioneer work is done: organization, perfection, fruition alone remain. There is no more to plead for, I expect, of course, the perennial pleading that all educational institutions, the most insatiate of modern mendicants, have to practise to keep up with the enlargement of ambitions and the growth of social needs. Minds are prepared: and this is the whole battle. Conviction is full grown. That women are to be educated is now, not conceded, but insisted on as a primary duty, - a duty as obvious and exacting, as completely beyond all question as to its reality, as the education of men. And the problems of women's education are henceforth precisely parallel with the problems of men's education, not the same as these, but of the same nature, resting on the same social presuppositions and involving the same view of life and its duties and responsibilities. These problems of female education are both interesting and pressing; interesting because they suggest new queries of sexual psychology and foreshadow the necessity of recasting some of the old educational conceptions, to which the long adjustment of procedures to the requirements of the other sex had brought the general pedagogic consciousness; and pressing, because the girls are here, waiting, anxious, determined, needing and deserving the best. Wisely to settle the problems of women's education is the paramount duty of the hour. Like the boys, the girls have their living to earn: they too have life before them: they too imagine careers. If a girl's will is not exactly the wind's will, her thoughts none the less are long, long thoughts. The girl of to-day no longer seeks an education as an ornament, as a mere addition to her personal attractions. She connects her education with her coming life of service to humanity. She wonders and asks whether this or that will be most useful to her if she teaches, if she writes in an office, if she studies medicine, if she learns nursing, if she learns a handicraft. Is not this new burden of responsibility, resting on the minds of the girls, an infinitely pathetic thing? A boy, if worst comes to worst, will elbow his way somehow: but what shall a girl do? She seeks advice; she is happy to be told, and never doubts your wisdom. Who can be a teacher of girls and not feel a certain awe in view of the unskeptical spirit with which he is met, - the entire belief of his pupils that all he says is true and important? What such teacher can avoid the feeling that it is sacredly incumbent on him to see to it that his utterances shall be so judicious, so grounded in honest conviction, so elevated above mere formalism, that they shall actually be true and important? He who has to advise young women as to intended occupations is often tempted to look upon the women only as more young men,

of opportunity still somewhat restricted, lacking somewhat in force and push; and is pretty sure to recommend to them the old courses of study that were made solely for men, and which, being already at hand ready made, obviate the necessity for thinking. Nor indeed is it possible to strike off at once a new plan that shall meet all the needs of a complicated situation, like that which confronts us at this moment in women's education. The easiest mode of procedure is to assume at the outset that women do not differ from men, and that accordingly all that is necessary is for the old institutions, as the phrase is, to throw open their doors to the sex,-and all is done. But this easiest way, I submit to you without the least misgiving, is also the way of consummate unwisdom. Most educational problems are intricate, and have to be worked out elaborately through all their perplexities. In education always distrust the seer, who tosses off an Orphic saying and then goes his way, leaving you to apply his oracle to the concrete cases. The profoundest and most pervasive fact of anthropology is the difference of sex. No other fact of human nature so colors life in all its aspects, so shapes manners and customs, so determines our very civilization. And education, which is only in part a natural and organic growth, beyond the reach of our wills, and in its other part is an institution, created by our volitions and votes, education, instead of standing aloof from this great fact of sex diversity, instead of pretending to solve the sex problems by denying their existence, must ever keep in mind this cardinal principle of the duality of human nature,-the division of mankind into men and women. Like male education, female education must consider the what and the how: what sciences, what arts, shall we teach, and how shall we teach them. What knowledge will be most useful to a woman; what accomplishments, what acquired skill, should she especially possess? Then what scholastic procedures are the best fitted for stimulating, interesting, and instructing young women's minds? The questions are indeed ancient, familiar to the comedy and the satire, no less than to the social philosophy, of all ages: but they have new bearings to-day, and must be discussed as if they were wholly modern. appeal. Literature, remember, is the record of thought or emotion, expressed with such charm of rhythm, or with such felicity of phrase and such power of style, that it continues to awaken sympathy in following generations, and becomes a recognized national possession. What the Anglo-Saxon branch of the great Aryan family essentially is, is reflected in its literature; that is to say, in English literature. How to bring the individual mind into closest touch with the great national mind is the problem of problems in national education. To understand America, for

example, we must understand English puritanism; and to understand English puritanism, we must not merely read the chronicle of seventeenth century events, but must chiefly study the great literary art of that period, as in *Comus*, and the popular religious fervor of the time, as in *Pilgrim's*.

The voice of Virginia Woolf on girl's education

"It was the woman, the human being whose sex made it her sacred duty to sacrifice herself to the father, whom Charlotte Bronte and Elizabeth Barrett had to kill." - **Virginia Woolf**

Before the mid of the 19th century, women were considered weak intellectually and physically. Such a concept was consolidated by social conventions. According to that concept, society was divided into two worlds: private and public. The private world implied that women should stay at home. They were not allowed to work or learn. They were educated only in a way that suited their claimed weak nature such as sewing, nursing and painting. The sole vocation for women was marriage. According to that role, women couldn't revolt because of fear, shame and rejection by society. The public world implied that men are strong mentally and physically. They were allowed to work, and were given proper education such as mathematics and science, ... etc. The sole vocation of men was to work and build society. That formula of dividing the world into two worlds was against human nature. Accordingly, it led to the emergence of several feminist groups which attempted to provide solutions to women's question. The feminist groups could be classified into liberal, Marxist, radical, psychoanalytic, social, existentialist and post-modernist. None of them has developed a comprehensive answer to the feminist question. But such coordination and understanding among them can make feminists achieve their goals, and help them eradicate women's sufferings concretely. According to the liberal feminists, the cause of women's oppression lies deep in traditions and false moral codes. They demand that women should be provided with proper education and economic equality with men.

Woolf recognizes that women are as curious, clever, and creative as men yet are bound by societal expectations of patriarchal ideology. Thus, they are not able to lead fully self-actualizing and fulfilling lives. In Victorian England, the woman in the house referred to by Woolf as the Angel in the House in *A Room of One's Own* is required by an elaborate patriarchal code to always put others above herself and exist solely for the purpose of inflating men's egos (45-7).

Woolf points out that while this position is one of great power, it derives its power through indirect influence and cannot convey the true desires and opinions of women. Describing the oppressive nature of marriage and family life to the mind of the female intellectual, she concludes:

To have lived a free life . . . would have meant for a woman . . . nervous stress and dilemma which might well have killed her. Had she survived, whatever she had written would have been twisted and deformed... That woman... was an unhappy woman, a woman at strife against herself. All the conditions of her life... were hostile to the state of mind which is needed to set free whatever is in the brain. (64-6)

Woolf further illustrates the oppressive nature of marriage and familial obligation in "Women and Fiction," saying:

". . . a woman was liable, as she was in the fifteenth century, to be beaten and flung about the room if she did not marry the man of her parents' choice". As Woolf continues, she notes an important shift that occurs in the latter half of the nineteenth century and continues through 1920: "The change... has turned the English woman . . . to a voter, a wage earner, a responsible citizen . . . they are intellectual, they are political".

Woolf suggests that this developing elevation of the status of women will continue in the future. Woolf views this education (revolutionized and changed) as a vehicle for change, which she strongly supports. However, critics note that school is the site of a gendered struggle because of the tension between what schools are and what they should be. Woolf sees traditional education as an obstacle for both men and women. She has a vision for emancipatory education (Hayes 27). Woolf is optimistic about the future of women's education, its ability to free women (and men), and its power to act as a catalyst for world peace as long as the educational establishment undergoes fundamental changes to remove the harmful influence of patriarchal ideology, which Woolf suggests is the primary cause of war and conflict (Hayes, 43, 114).

In her later work *Three Guineas*, Woolf takes a step further the idea she developed about educational equality earlier in her career with *A Room of One's Own*. Instead of arguing only for educational equality, in *Three Guineas* Woolf argues for a dismantling of the existing educational system and for its replacement with a more egalitarian system that would allow women the possibility for as much success as men were previously afforded in the

traditional liberal education. Woolf argues that the institution of education must be reformed because the system in existence is an extension of patriarchal social structures that glorified violence and explicitly taught men how to engage in war. So when Woolf is asked how to prevent war, she looks to the system that perpetrates this status quo. Woolf posits that:

“the most effective way in which we can help you through education to prevent war is to subscribe as generously as possible to the colleges for the daughters of educated men...by so doing we are making a positive contribution to the prevention of war”

Woolf suggests that a more educated populace will stand up against war, especially women educated outside of the patriarchal education system that promotes violence and conflict. Woolf advocates for the education of all women, regardless of color or class, and “looks critically at the education men have had, and finds serious flaws with it, ultimately concluding that it has been a dismal failure” Woolf ponders this failure and finds that there must be some fundamental flaw with formal education, which she concludes is patriarchy (Hayes 1). Woolf does not want women to receive the same failed education of men but desires a radical shift that not only accommodates women but allows them to flourish. The traditional liberal education derived from Greek tradition, “does not pay particular attention to the lives of women . . . does not allow women to question the accuracy of their experience.” (Szczepaniak 267). Woolf’s mounting dissatisfaction is evident in *Three Guineas*. She writes:

“ ...burn the old college to the ground. Set fire to the old hypocrisies And let the daughters of educated men dance round the fire and heap armful upon armful of dead leaves upon the flames. And let their mothers lean from the upper windows and cry, “Let it blaze! Let it blaze! For we have done with this ‘education!’”

When discussing the reform that she poses for the future of education, Woolf suggests that there needs to be a change in who is teaching. She says, “[In] The new college the teachers should be drawn from the good livers as well as the good thinkers” (200). Woolf rejects the traditional structure of liberal education derived from the education provided to young men in ancient Greece and favors instead a more egalitarian system that places women on equal footing with men so that by starting off in the same place, they have equal opportunities for success in life.

Mary Wollstonecraft called for re-organizing society and educating women in order to develop them morally and intellectually. J.S. Mill, argued that women are in need of the same civil liberties and economic opportunities as men, and that men should work for liberating women and changing the traditional way of their thinking. Psycho-analytic feminists found the source of women's oppression is hidden deep in women's psyche. They called women to probe the depth of their psyche in order to evaluate their position as women. Post-modern feminist argued that the more feminist thought they have, the better. Helen Cixous argued that women write differently from men because of their biological differences. She believed that, by developing a feminine writing, women would change the way the world thinks of them and their place as well. Julia Kristeva differs from Cixous. She rejected Cixous' identification of the masculine with biological men and the feminine with biological women. She thought that boys can be identified with their mothers, and girls can be identified with their fathers. Girls can write in a masculine mode, and boys can write in a feminine mode. Virginia Woolf found that women were excluded by men from being the makers of these masterpieces, so she created for women a female tradition in "A Room of One's Own" (1929). In order to kill the angel and create an artist, women should create their own identity, talk about their own experiences and encourage women's education.