

Scripts for Life: How Plays, Novels, and Conduct Manuals Created Women in Eighteenth-Century Britain

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Long before Helen Gurley Brown and Oprah, women learned how to live their lives through literature—plays, novels, and conduct manuals provided instructions on what women needed to do in order to be women. In eighteenth-century England, ideas about marriage were changing and women were writing books and appearing on stage; these (and other) shifts made female behavior a popular topic. This essay examines sample works by playwright Hannah Cowley, Jane Austen, and conduct manual writers to reveal the ways authors conveyed mixed messages about acceptable activities for women as they explored subtle new roles while respecting the rules.

The term “conduct manual” might conjure quaint images of young women in long dresses gathered by the fire, most of them sewing while one reads aloud instructions for behavior—how to be a good friend, daughter, and most importantly, wife. Perhaps we think of the Bennet sisters enduring Mr. Collins reading Fordyce’s *Sermons for Young Women* in Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*. Or maybe we think about *All the Rules: Time-tested Secrets for Capturing the Heart of Mr. Right*, which (at the time of writing) is the eleventh most popular dating book on Amazon.com. Since the early days of mass publishing, writers have been issuing conduct manuals, explaining to women how to act like women. The activity is hardly superfluous—as Simone de Beauvoir observed, “One is not born, but, rather, *becomes a woman*” (n. pag.; original italics). Conduct manuals guide young girls into womanhood, teaching them how to behave in the manner necessary for others to recognize them as respectable women.

In eighteenth-century Britain, such conduct manuals were particularly significant. Society was changing—the method of arranging marriages was shifting and the boundaries between classes were blurring. It was of paramount importance that a woman understand how to represent her social class

and maintain a solid marriage. Every woman had a part to play, and conduct manuals provided the script. Of course, books that offered straightforward advice were not the only means of instructing the public. Novels and plays joined conduct manuals in the debate over appropriate female behavior. Even as the basic tenets for the ideal woman remained "chaste, silent, and obedient," literature argued about the details. What mattered more—the means or the end? Perception or reality? Word or deed? Perhaps surprisingly, novels and conduct manuals seem to borrow freely from theatre, employing concepts of performance to describe the actions of the new ideal. Literary critics have observed the links between conduct manuals and novels, and between novels and theatre, but few have closed the circle and recognized the conversation between conduct manuals and theatre. Considered together, though, the three genres reveal intricate representations of the kinds of women that their readers were meant to embody, and they thus leave for modern readers a diary of questions and answers that continue to resonate with a tantalizingly contradictory decisiveness.

An example from each genre reveals the common concerns. Playwright Hannah Cowley demonstrates the extreme measures a woman might take to control her marital status in *A Bold Stroke for a Husband*. In *Sense and Sensibility*, Jane Austen contrasts the behavior of sisters Elinor and Marianne as they navigate society's expectations and social constraints in the pursuit of loving marriages. And three conduct manuals offer counsel on the formation and maintenance of a stable union. All these, like others in their genre, tacitly acknowledge that a woman's actions determine her place in society and that her social situation guides her actions. By providing instructions for behavior, the writers admit that the idea of "woman" is not inherent but achieved. The power was in the performance—acting like a woman was the most important function of women, but as an examination of these texts indicates, and as every actor knows, there is always room to play.

The common thread uniting the three genres in this discussion is the performance of womanhood. As scholar Judith Butler states, "gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*" (270; original italics). Butler points out that gender, and therefore the idea of what defines womanhood, is constructed by society's expectations, which are reinforced through actions that both demonstrate and are the desired result.

Eighteenth-century authors who wrote about women repeated the spirit of Butler's "stylized acts" in their characters, but often with small adjustments that suggested alternative interpretations. The female characters were socially-acceptable women who fulfilled the basic requirements of their gender while they engaged in activities that had the potential to threaten the structure they purported to uphold. Writers exploited the necessity of performance to test the boundaries of permissible behavior.

Womanliness was something to be learned and performed, or to use Joan Riviere's phrasing, something that could be "assumed and worn as a mask" (38). The mask of womanliness could be used to hide the characters' unusual means to respectable ends. Writers demonstrated that gender, as Butler argues, was not a stable expression of reality, but a fluid and slippery concept that underwent constant renegotiations. Thus, as we shall see, Hannah Cowley's heroines could dress like a man and seduce another woman if need be.

What a Woman Wants: A Bold Stroke for a Husband

In *A Bold Stroke for a Husband* (1783), Hannah Cowley takes rather a dim view of the honor of men as she presents a story of deception for love's sake. *Bold Stroke* relies on performance and its heroines' skilled deceptions to ensure happy marriages and a functioning society. The play excuses rebellion by making radical acts necessary as it observes the limits of what a woman can and cannot do, even when she finds temporary freedom defying the usual strictures of propriety.

As the play opens, Don Carlos paces the streets of Madrid, infuriated that his mistress, Donna Laura, has replaced him with a new lover. In a chance meeting with his friend Don Julio, Carlos reveals how he grew bored with his marriage, had affairs with peasant girls in his village, and finally came to Madrid to escape his wife's recriminations. He also tells Julio that he has given Laura a settlement of family lands, and if he fails to retrieve it from her, he will be penniless. The second plot concerns Olivia, who has been resisting her father's attempts to marry her off by pretending to be unpleasant and temperamental, waiting for him to present the man she has decided she wants to marry: Don Julio. Olivia's cousin, Victoria, pays a visit and explains that, disguised as a cavalier named Florio, she has seduced her husband's mistress, and all that remains is to secure the return of the settlement, which she hopes will also restore her husband to her. The women's plots and deceptions give them the results they'd hoped for: Olivia gets the husband she wants and Victoria gets her husband back.

Olivia wants the ability to choose her own husband. Upper-class families had not yet relinquished their ability to arrange marriages, as they had a vested interest in controlling who got what, from offspring to property. Olivia's father describes her as "pretty, and witty, and rich—a match for a prince," and Olivia knows that her wealth makes her very desirable (1.2). In fact, her bad temper is not always enough to frighten away prospective husbands, and she and her maid recount some of the extraordinary measures she has had to take to ensure her continued freedom, such as affecting a passion for cats or inventing an unsavory ancestry. In a brief soliloquy, she admits that only one thing will put an end to her uncooperative behavior: "Hah! my poor father, your anxieties will never end 'till you bring Don Julio.—Command me to sacrifice my *petulance*, my *liberty* to him, and Iphigenia herself, could not be more obedient" (2.2; original italics). Literary critic Jeffrey N. Cox comments, "If these women seek marriage, it is marriage on their own terms, marriage grounded in the recognition of female sexuality" (368). Olivia's pretense gives her the right to choose her own husband, one who will satisfy her, not her father. Through a performance that deliberately defies what a woman should be, Olivia is securing a future that will allow her to return to the part society expects her to play: devoted wife.

It is not surprising that Olivia would fight to wed a man she finds suitable, given the state of her cousin's marriage. Cowley presents the situation artfully, first giving Victoria's husband's version of events. Carlos explains to Julio in the opening scene that he soon grew bored of married life and came to Madrid for some diversion. He is currently in despair over losing the affection of his mistress, Laura, who provides a sharp critique of the double standard applied to men and women. Laura informs Carlos that he is only upset at losing her because she left him before he had a chance to discard her. She vows her love for Florio, who has replaced Carlos in her affections, and with whom she intends to enjoy the benefit of the settlement she obtained from Carlos.

Up to this point, Victoria has not been named as Carlos's wife. It is hinted at within a conversation her maid Inis has with Olivia's maid Minette. The two are comparing the temperaments of their

mistresses, and Inis, ignorant of the hoax, marvels at Minette's ability to handle Olivia's volatility. She describes Victoria as "much too gentle," and Minette responds, "Aye, and you see what she gets by it; had she been more spirited, perhaps her husband would not have forsaken her" (1.2). This counters Carlos's description of his "sullen" wife, and anyone might forgive the tears and hysterics of a woman who discovers her husband has been carrying on with every other woman in the neighborhood (1.1). It also begins a discussion of how a woman should behave, which continues throughout the play.

Cowley nonchalantly reveals the identity of Florio in the second scene of Act 2. When Olivia asks her usually gloomy cousin why she is smiling, Victoria responds, "who could resist *such* a temptation to smile? a letter from Donna Laura, my husband's mistress, stiling me her dearest Florio! her life! her soul! and complaining of a twelve hours absence, as the bitterest misfortune" (2.2; original italics). The audience is given little time to react, as Olivia, already aware of the disguise, continues the conversation with gusto, praising Victoria for her triumph and asking her what magic she used to steal Laura from Carlos. Victoria maintains that she did not need to consult the supernatural: "Yes, powerful witchery—the knowledge of my sex. Oh! did the men but know us, as well as we do ourselves;—but thank fate they do not, 'twould be dangerous" (2.2). The insinuation that a cross-dressed woman's efforts to seduce a woman will meet with more success than a man's attempt is itself a dangerous suggestion.

Cowley's use of the cross-dressed woman as suitor removes the man from the position of power. Victoria originates the action she takes as Florio. Although the goal of her mission is to regain the affection of her wandering husband, he is not the director of the situation, but an unhappy participant, and even a pawn. This alignment puts the wronged wife in an unusually strong position. Rather than content herself with the traditional tears and hysterics, Victoria is asserting the knowledge she possesses as a woman, which she recognizes as being greater than a man's and unknown to him.

Such a radical act was acceptable to Cowley's audience, because Victoria is married to the man she pursues. Cowley's heroines are capable of employing complex disguises and schemes to secure appropriate husbands for themselves, but this highly transgressive act of seducing another woman is reserved for the most dire of circumstances; the restoration of a family justifies all. Victoria establishes her unselfish (and nonsexual) rationale for her scheme, asserting that it is distasteful to her. She does, however, admit that her first reason for donning a disguise and visiting Laura was more wounded womanly pride than a desire for revenge:

Victoria: [Laura] robbed me of [Carlos's] heart; I concluded she had fascinations which nature had denied to me; it was impossible to visit her as a woman; I, therefore, assumed the [disguise of a] Cavalier to study her, that I might, if possible, be to my Carlos, all he found in her...In this adventure I learnt more than I expected;—my (oh cruel!) my husband has given this woman an estate, almost all that his dissipations had left us...You, [Olivia,] who know me, can judge how I suffered in prosecuting my plan. I have thrown off the delicacy of sex; I have worn the mask of love to the destroyer of my peace—but the object is too great to be abandoned—nothing less than to save my husband from ruin, and to restore him, again a lover, to my faithful bosom. (2.2)

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Her explanation to Olivia also reassures the audience of her adherence to eighteenth-century expectations of appropriate female behavior. Everything she has done has been to secure the return of her husband, first through a discovery of the charms he found so enticing in Laura, and then by a restoration of the family's fortune.

The Victoria and Olivia plots are brought together in the final scene, after Victoria has successfully resolved the Laura situation. A complicated series of disguises and pretenses results in one reveal after another. Ultimately, Olivia admits that she loves Julio. Thus, when he asks her father for her hand, she is able at last to play the part of obedient daughter. In the middle of this resolution, Victoria and Carlos arrive to share the news of their reconciliation and to impart advice to the newly betrothed. Victoria reminds the company that

it is not necessary that a husband should be *faulty*, to make a wife's character *exemplary*.—Should he be tenderly watchful of your happiness, your gratitude will give a thousand graces to your conduct; whilst the purity of your manners, and the nice honour of your life, will gain you the approbation of those, whose praise is fame. (5.4)

She provides a quick primer on the appropriate behavior of both men and women, reminding the audience that women's conduct cannot be considered in isolation. If she is expected to behave like a respectable woman, then men should be held to an equally high standard. She does not, however, point out how clever she and Olivia have been as they twisted performance to suit themselves, outsmarting the men, but arriving at an end that satisfies society's expectations.

Austen's Actresses: Sense and Sensibility

Jane Austen's first published novel, *Sense and Sensibility*, was printed in 1811. The two elder Dashwood sisters seem to embody the contrasting ideologies of the title: Elinor has calm, logical sense and Marianne succumbs to the grand emotions embraced by sensibility. The book chronicles their lives in the aftermath of their father's death, an event that forces them, their younger sister Margaret, and their mother to turn over their home to their older half-brother and take up residence in a cottage in a neighboring county. The sisters each fall in love, suffer disappointment, and in the end, marry. The respectability of Elinor and Marianne remains unquestioned throughout the story, and the casual reader might wonder where the concept of performance can be found, and why it would even be necessary. The novel ends with felicitous marriages and general happiness—what is so radical about that? The argument over the existence or the extent of Austen's feminism (an anachronistic phrase) is another topic altogether, one that will not be addressed here. But even assuming a politically apathetic and non-revolutionary Austen, her characters do engage in performative techniques to control their images. Contrary to Marianne's proclamation that she conceals nothing, both she and Elinor perform in various ways for a range of reasons and to different audiences.

As many contemporaneous novels, plays, and conduct manuals indicate, performance is necessary for marriage, and Austen seems to agree. Many of the performances are connected to courtship. Almost every main character keeps at least one secret from the others, including family members. Even Marianne, who professes an open and sharing nature, does not reveal her true relationship with Willoughby to Elinor and seems to expect Elinor to hide her feelings for Edward, though she

later recriminates her for doing just that. In chapter 4, Marianne laments Edward's faults, but she assures Elinor that "'I shall very soon think him handsome, Elinor, if I do not now. When you tell me to love him as a brother, I shall no more see imperfection in his face, than I now do in his heart'" (16). She is astonished to learn that Elinor and Edward are not in fact engaged, and her surprise indicates that she fully expected her sister to conceal the progress of her romance. Performance, it seems, is a matter of course. However, in chapter 27, she scolds Elinor for telling her nothing about Edward and declares that she conceals nothing about Willoughby, although she has never clearly related the status of their relationship; only when his engagement to Miss Grey is discovered does Marianne admit that there had been no formal understanding or declaration of love between them.

For Marianne, the action matters more than the impression it gives; the action might even supersede what it communicates. The performance, not the message, is paramount. She believes she has concealed nothing from Elinor because she has not endeavored to hide the strength of her feelings for Willoughby. How her actions have been interpreted is not her concern. Yet she has been made aware of the disconnect between reality and interpretation in her first conversation with Elinor about Edward, when Elinor tells her she's had no assurances of Edward's affection for her: "Marianne was astonished to find how much the imagination of her mother and herself had outstripped the truth" (17). Austen's characters must navigate performance in all its guises, not only presenting their own, but also understanding how they will be perceived by others and how to likewise make their own translations of other people's performances.

Marianne fails to follow the example of both conduct books and the theatre, which stressed the importance of performance in every aspect of courtship. She alone among the characters does not deliberately guard a secret. She never tells Elinor that she and Willoughby are engaged; though her conduct has led Elinor to that conclusion, Marianne would doubtless hold herself blameless. Elinor's explanation of the Edward situation echoes advice literature's counsel that a woman should declare her own preference for a man only after he has announced his for her: "'I am by no means assured of his regard for me,'" she tells Marianne. "'There are moments when the extent of it seems doubtful; and till his sentiments are fully known, you cannot wonder at my wishing to avoid any encouragement of my own partiality, by believing or calling it more than it is'" (17). Only by concealing her own feelings can Elinor secure Edward's affection, but Marianne follows a different set of rules, and her own love affair is unsuccessful.

Marianne's interaction with Willoughby is utterly devoid of performance. She hides her esteem neither from him nor from society at large. She sees no reason to disguise her feelings: "But Marianne abhorred all concealment where no real disgrace could attend unreserve; and to aim at the restraint of sentiments which were not in themselves illaudable, appeared to her not merely an unnecessary effort, but a disgraceful subjection of reason to common-place and mistaken notions" (41). While other characters use disguise to question the rules of behavior, Marianne does so by insisting on a lack of performance altogether.

As much as Marianne might protest otherwise, however, her behavior is not entirely without guile. By making a choice to be open about her feelings, she is indeed performing the part of a girl following the teachings of "sensibility," a popular philosophy at the time that emphasized natural landscapes and, more importantly here, natural emotions that were expressed physically, the entire body performing a reaction through fainting, tears, or illness. The gently mocking narrator seems to

further establish the calculation behind Marianne's professed spontaneous expressions of emotions when relating her behavior after Willoughby unexpectedly departs for London:

Marianne would have thought herself very inexcusable had she been able to sleep at all the first night after parting from Willoughby. She would have been ashamed to look her family in the face the next morning, had she not risen from her bed in more need of repose than when she lay down in it...She got up with a headache, was unable to talk, and unwilling to take any nourishment; giving pain every moment to her mother and sisters, and forbidding all attempt at consolation from either. Her sensibility was potent enough! (63)

Although her despair is genuine and she is in no danger of betraying her ideals, her awareness of them is a reminder that she knows the requirements of the part she is playing. Even if the part seems natural and effortless, it is a part and a performance nonetheless.

Marianne's ability to embody a performance so completely is her salvation in the end. Although she resolves to exert Elinor-like control over her emotions in future, her failure to do so ensures her happiness. At the novel's conclusion, Marianne weds Colonel Brandon, apparently because he is a good man and everyone expects her to. But though her initial feelings contain "no sentiment superior to strong esteem and lively friendship," the narrator reports further that "Marianne could never love by halves; and her whole heart became, in time, as much devoted to her husband, as it had once been to Willoughby" (288). Here, as with her reaction to Willoughby's departure, Marianne attempts to demonstrate that an awareness of the guidelines does not necessarily mean that following them equates putting on an act. But her performance of devoted wife remains a performance, even as it enables the move from friendship to love.

The methodology of each sister succeeds because whether they admit it or not, their actions are informed by performance. Elinor is clearly more aware of the part she plays than is Marianne; Elinor knows she must conceal her feelings for Edward until he has revealed his to her, and there is never any doubt that Lucy's secret engagement to Edward is safe with Elinor. The parameters of Elinor's role are always clearly defined for her, so she follows them. Both Brandon and Willoughby turn to her to confide the stories of their previous loves. She is recognized as one who plays her part to perfection, and her patience is rewarded.

Elinor is almost constantly performing, especially after Lucy Steele has forced her into a silent conspiracy by telling her a secret that Elinor must keep from everyone, including her sister. Her every conversation is thus a pretense as she must hide her knowledge of Lucy's engagement to Edward and her feelings about it. She is a repository of secrets, and although it is her calm and straightforward manner that makes her appear so trustworthy, the result is really an enigmatic young woman who knows something about everyone, though she consistently pretends otherwise. Indeed, as Emily Hodgson Anderson observes in her study of the links between eighteenth-century theatre and novels, "any potential to express that which is 'real' remains contingent on the ability to express that which is feigned" (14). Elinor exhibits her very real sense by expressing a feigned persona of ignorance—no one knows what she knows or how she feels. She is interpreted as sincere and trustworthy because she excels at deception.

Austen carefully draws a distinction between social performances and harmful deception. Although she stops short of condemning Willoughby completely for his callous treatment of young Eliza,

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allowing him an advantageous marriage and a relatively happy life, her characters make clear their disappointment in him and their relief that Marianne avoided Eliza's fate. One of Marianne's primary concerns is whether or not Willoughby's behavior with her was real or fake, telling Elinor that she would be more at ease "if I could be satisfied on one point, if I could be allowed to think that he was not *always* acting a part, not *always* deceiving me" (261; original italics). Related to this worry is how she responded to his actions. She has realized her inability to interpret the performances of others and has linked her own conduct to her understanding of the way the people around her behave. If Willoughby has indeed deceived her about his feelings for her, then her reaction to him was incorrect. She compares herself unfavorably to Elinor, seeming to grasp the danger of performing before the part is learned.

Even the writers of conduct books knew that being a socially-acceptable woman did not equate a performance-free life. Readers were often advised to conceal their true feelings and manipulate their partners; even popular author Dr. Gregory recommended that a woman of intellect hide the scope of her knowledge, telling his readers, "if you happen to have any learning, keep it a profound secret, especially from the men, who generally look with a jealous and malignant eye on a woman of great parts, and a cultivated understanding" (46). The debate is not whether or not a woman should perform, but how. Thus the actions of Elinor and Marianne exhibit variations on a theme, from which women could learn the finer points of performance.

The performances characters engage in are, unsurprisingly, connected to the medium in which they are presented. Theatre, with its access to visual representation, often relied on literal disguises, mistaken identities, masks, and cross-dressing. The theatre encouraged theatrical behavior. Similarly, although Austen's characters are infused with performance, they are also influenced by the form of the novel they inhabit, and their theatricality is thus tied to the act of reading. Their performances must be "read" by their fellow characters, and they must present themselves accordingly and understand how to read the texts around them. Hence Marianne's anxiety about Willoughby: She has no confidence in her ability to interpret what she reads in other people's behavior. If he had been "*always* acting a part" and "*always* deceiving" her, then she is as much at fault for being a poor reader and interpreter of performance as he is for acting out the lie (261; original italics).

Austen thus unites the visual performatives of the theatre with textual performance, employing words rather than costume to indicate the shifting roles characters inhabit. She adapts a theatrical device to her medium, translating the method and maintaining the purpose. Performance is no less effective when it can be read and not seen; the words of the characters become their literary costumes, cloaking their identities and hiding their desires until their actions betray them for the pretenders—for good or ill—they are.

The Character Sketch: Three Conduct Manuals

In 1765, a third edition was published of *The Matrimonial Preceptor. A Collection of Examples and Precepts Relating to the Married State From The Most Celebrated Writers Ancient and Modern*. Its sixty-three chapters were taken from various sources, such as periodicals, novels, and classic thinkers like Plutarch. The chapters are largely concerned with the formation and sustenance of a happy

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marriage, with directives for both sexes. Many entries tacitly acknowledge the necessity of performance.

A chapter titled "The duties of a good wife" advises benign deception in plain terms. It is worth quoting the detailed instructions at length:

[A woman] should study [her husband's] character, taste, and defects, and conform to his will in all reasonable things. If she should be under a necessity of thinking and acting different from him, let her not too violently oppose his inclination, but seem at first to fall in with his sentiments, and then mildly demonstrate to him that his resolutions are liable to some inconveniencies [sic], giving at the same time a few hints of other means to satisfy them: in short, let her, if possible, make him fix on those very means, that he may think he follows his own will while he is directed by her's [sic]. (214)

The wife is not advised to just agree with her husband—instead, she receives instructions on how to manipulate *him* into agreeing with her while persuading him to think that his new point of view is what he thought all along (a technique illustrated by Hannah Cowley more than once). Although the remaining pages of the chapter glorify the good wife and establish her importance to a stable home and society, the recommended subterfuge of the first paragraph reassures female readers that their intelligence and spirit are not being underestimated. The author praises wives who are not "stupidly silent" and are instead possessed of minds "enriched with all useful knowledge" and have "a taste for polite literature" (217).

These few pages perfectly encapsulate the emerging attempt to redefine women's role in a changing society. Literature of all genres was attempting to reconcile a domestic homemaker with the model of a marriage founded on mutual regard rather than parental instructions, as well as the performances demanded by both. The woman described in the chapter meets all of the requirements of a help-mate, comforter, and encourager, but she is also endowed with a quick mind and is able to converse intelligently with her husband (and occasionally to get the better of him). The character portrait that emerges here seems to foreshadow Hannah Cowley's clever heroines. Similar to her theatrical counterparts, the woman in this chapter must be a skilled performer, able to play the role of the housewife and know when to let her intelligence show and when to use it more subtly.

The question was still being debated when the second edition of Eugenia Stanhope's advice on relationships past the courting stage was published in 1798: *The Deportment of a Married Life:Laid Down in a Series of Letters, Written by the Honourable E---- S----, a Few Years Since, to a Young Lady, her Relation, then Lately Married*. Stanhope's first two letters address the disposition of a wife and of a husband, and her recommendations do not contrast sharply with other writers' counsel. It is the woman's duty to create a home that her husband will find comfortable and more attractive than drinking parties, and she is expected to "[conform] herself to the Sentiments of her Husband" in order to achieve domestic happiness (2). But in the chapter on the disposition of a husband, which is still directed to Stanhope's young female relation, the new wife is given subtle instruction for, in effect, deceiving and manipulating her husband.

Stanhope tells her reader to make "herself and her House agreeable in a Degree superior to that to which those Scenes [of debauchery] can pretend" in order to convince her husband to stop drinking

(16). She points out that "railing at the Fault" will be a waste of time (16). She provides a lengthy explanation of the reasons for men's "Obstinacy":

They cannot bear to be led by a Woman to any Thing. They have a settled Opinion of us, as Inferior in Natural Authority and in Understanding; and it will have an Appearance of meanness to themselves, to be guided by those whom they should direct; or to be governed by those whom they should command. Endeavour not to get the better of this Opinion: I believe it is justly founded; but, if it was not, 'tis not your Business to reform the World. (17)

Although she claims to agree with men's perception of women's inferiority, she does so after suggesting that her reader can outsmart her husband and trick him into giving up drink. She exhibits a performative contradiction between words and action. The wife in question should then assume the demeanor of an agreeable and passive female while she secretly maneuvers circumstances to suit her goal. Stanhope advises her to maintain the performance even after the result has been achieved: "And, to add the finishing Touch to the complete Victory, do not seem to know that you have won it. As you never let him discover, during the Attempt to ween him from these false Pleasures, that you was attempting to draw him from them; so, now you have effected it, never let him discover that you once thought him addicted to them" (22). There seem to be two wives here—one following society's rules for meekness and obedience and the other using the appearance of propriety to fool her husband.

Just as in other advice books and plays like those of Hannah Cowley, the slight deviation is permitted (and encouraged) because the end result is socially acceptable. To return to Cowley's *A Bold Stroke for a Husband*, Victoria is allowed the much greater transgression of dressing as a man to seduce her husband's mistress because she does so only to restore the family unit and return her wayward mate to his proper place by her side. Stanhope's reader is given specific instructions—how to correct her husband's misbehavior by adopting a certain strategy. However, there is no guarantee that she and other readers won't employ this information in other circumstances, which is what makes these small inconsistencies so intriguing. While adhering to the constructs that governed women's lives, even an apparently rigid writer like Stanhope acknowledged imperfections and pointed out gaps that women could exploit to their benefit.

While Stanhope instructs her reader on life as a married woman, Mrs. Cockle addresses almost every phase and role young ladies might encounter. Her book, *Important Studies for the Female Sex, in Reference to Modern Manners; Addressed to a Young Lady of Distinction* (1809), guides readers from cradle to grave, beginning with the importance of "religious example" before continuing to outline the importance of truth and charity, the duties of women as daughter, sister, wife, mother, and friend, the evils of seduction, "the Value and proper Use of Time," and finally, "On death." One chapter, titled somewhat coyly, "On Attachment," addresses courtship.

Significantly, Mrs. Cockle is wary of performance. Beauty seems to be a mask that must be got behind. Her generous statements about the nature of men notwithstanding, she advises her readers to remain watchful and discreet, charging them to deceive men about the depth of their emotions until they are certain of his: "To judge in such cases from *actions* not *words*, is alas! the error of our sex in general. It is the rock on which their happiness is often destroyed for ever. The privilege of man is to *select*—that of woman to *accept or reject*" (112; original italics). Mrs. Cockle is concerned

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that her young readers will allow their power to go to their heads, and she presses upon them the importance of carefully evaluating a man's behavior and making an informed decision:

Let his attentions be marked with every degree of homage, of assiduity, of attraction, yet never for a moment suffer yourself to suppose any man has a preference for you till he has *declared* it, and then reflect seriously ere you reply to such a declaration; consider it not as the little triumph of vanity, receive it not with the pride of conquest, but recollect that on your determination rests the probable happiness or misery of your future life. (113; original italics)

Her cautions would perhaps have benefitted Marianne, who too late bemoans her fragile ability to read and understand Willoughby's actions and intentions. Performance was clearly a tool to be used carefully. Women could exploit it and remain within the bounds of propriety, but men were a different story.

Women were increasingly public participants throughout the eighteenth century. The attempt to assert rules and delineate what a woman should be indicates that the establishment was threatened by the growing visibility and viability of women—harmless things are ignored, but dangerous things are controlled.

In an essay on "The Ambiguities of Literature," Jean-Paul Desaiwe writes, "In the mirror of literature every woman could both dream and learn about the power, and fragility, of her charms; about the infidelity of men and the benefits of marriage; about the need to be (or at least to appear) virtuous; and about guilty desires" (293-4). Although his discussion centers on French and English poetry and novels, the description suits an expansive definition of "literature" to include conduct books and theatre. In each of these, women could find examples of what to do, what not to do, and how to combine the two.

There has been a growing awareness that women were doing more than cooking, cleaning, bearing children, and posing for portraits throughout the ages. Admitting women into the discussion of art and the written word expands knowledge of society as a whole. Reading advice literature, novels, and plays provides insight into what women were warned against and what threats they were perceived to wield. Looking at all three genres in concert helps elucidate too the ways women communicated with each other, as though through a secret language or code. Few of the heroines examined here declare themselves as role models for a new kind of woman. They are mindful of male authority. But whether in the theatre, in a novel, or in a conduct book, they provide examples of performance. Once the rules have been learned, they indicate, women can move around within them, nudging gently, almost imperceptibly, as they pursue what they want.

Significantly, what the women wanted was always sanctioned by society—Elinor did not suggest to Edward that they try living together first, just to make sure they were really compatible. The slippery steps toward an assertive female agenda did not by themselves lead to revolutionary changes. They

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are, however, markers along the long path of women's progress toward equality. In the pages of books and plays, women could carve out a sacred space for themselves, places to discuss issues that were important to them. They could carry on long-distance and time-traveling conversations. So many voices talking to each other could not be ignored and could not be drowned out. Examining the connections between theatre, novels, and conduct manuals as a circular conduit rather than one-sided dictations deepens our understanding of the time they represent in their pages, contextualizing their messages and revealing the multitude of roles women performed, the cues they took and gave, and the sober but inspiring legacy they leave.

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