Civilising Women?
Women, Morals, and Manners in Eighteenth-Century Britain

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The pun in the title of this article, the ambiguity of the phrase 'civilising women,' would not have been recognised in the seventeenth century. As all the authorities at the time agreed, women had to be civilised. Since they allegedly had little in the way of reason and self-command, yet possessed dangerous passions in abundance, they had to be put under the firm control of fathers, husbands, or other male relatives. The great importance of rank should not be underestimated, however, and no servant would have dared to resist an order by his mistress just because she was a woman. But even at the very top of the social ladder the prejudices against women were remarkably strong, as Elizabeth I had to realise when she was crowned in November 1558. Only a few months before, John Knox had published the pamphlet *The First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women* (1558), in which he put forth what many Englishmen felt: That to be governed by a woman was unnatural, even monstrous. Compared to men, women were the 'weaker vessel'; they were physically inferior because of the composition of their 'humours,' less constant, and therefore prone to infidelity and treachery, less reasonable, and therefore not able to govern their passions. Knox could, moreover, cite a whole range of authorities who unanimously supported his opinion that women were, because of their very 'inordinate lust' and strong passions, incapable of controlling themselves, much less others. Philosophical and juridical works agreed that women were neither fit nor entitled to rule; and even the Bible - especially Paul's interpretation of Eve's behaviour concerning the Fall from Paradise - was taken to ordain that it was women's duty to be silent and to obey. History, then considered as magistra vitae, could also be used in order to confirm this view, and Knox could safely conclude that "women as nature and experience to this day declare them" were "impacient, feble and foolishe [...], unconstant, variable, [and] cruell" (Knox, 1972, 374).

In spite of his confident posture, Knox's pamphlet does not reflect favourably on male rationality and foresight, either, and a year later it dawned on him that he had better attempt to get on with the Queen. But even when he tried to curry favour with Elizabeth in 1559, he was still not willing to take back "anie principall point" of his argument (Knox, J966, 48). After all, how could he deny what everybody knew was right? That the very fact of a woman in a position of authority posed a severe problem was recognised by other renowned churchmen as well, who nonetheless wanted to pla-

cate Elizabeth and attempted to legitimate her rule. John Calvin said that a female monarch was "a deviation from the primitive and established order of nature, it ought to be held as a judgment on man for his dereliction of his rights, just like slavery" (quoted in Hackett 39), a legitimisation that was not very flattering to the new monarch, either.[1] Even the Bishop of London, John Aylmer, who rushed to Elizabeth's defence in his work *An Harborowe for Faithfull and Trewe Subjects*, had to concede "with Aristotle" that "the male is in alle likelihood meeter to rule, than the woman in many respects" (quoted in Williams 427). Although Aylmer emphasised that Englishmen should obey their Queen, because God could make even the frail and imperfect body of a woman his instrument, he obviously shared the predominant views about women and was less than enthusiastic about female character traits.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, therefore, the idea that women could civilise others was more or less unthinkable. Women were less perfect than men, inferior in each and every respect, and even dutiful wives were neither equal nor superior to their 'natural' head and master. Given the many circumstances that served to confirm these opinions - among them customs and laws which subordinated the wife to the husband's intellect and will - it is quite astonishing that within a century the situation changed completely. At the end of the eighteenth century, a new image of women had gained ground, an image that was not only highly favourable to supposedly natural female characteristics, but also involved a re-adjustment with regard to the respective position of men and women. This new conception of the 'nature' of women - which was matched by a new conception of the characteristics of men - enhanced their standing to such a degree that it was now thinkable, and even seemed obvious, that women were civilising agents, and indeed the teachers of men.

This article will therefore focus on the role that women played in 'civilising Great Britain.' I will begin by sketching the changes in the attitudes towards women, paying special attention to those changes that we have to take into account in order to understand the new importance that was assigned to women. The next part will be devoted to the different aspects of the civilising influence that contemporaries ascribed to women, before I end my paper with a few remarks on the achievements of women who made good use of the new opportunities opened up to them during the course of the century.

It has to be borne in mind, however, that I will focus on the new tendencies that brought about this reassessment of the role of women. The conservative voices that tried to uphold the traditional distinctions between men and women will be mentioned only in passing. It is, moreover, important to remember that the belief in the positive characteristics of the female sex was more or less confined to (Anglo-Saxon) women of the middling and upper

1 For a more detailed discussion of the arguments of Aylmer and Calvin, see Hackett 39f., and Berry 69f.

ranks. Though it is never spelt out in the many sources which document the new belief in the 'nature' of women, this cultural transformation did not affect the image of 'others' of a different ethnic origin - like 'Oriental' women or so-called 'savages' - and of the lower classes. In fact, some of the arguments I cite here were also used in order to claim the superiority of the middling ranks over both upper and lower orders, a topic that I have dealt with elsewhere.[2] It should also be noted that I do not maintain that this favourable image of women was of a long duration. I rather think that, at the end of the eighteenth century, there was a brief moment when, due to numerous interrelated changes in culture and society, women enjoyed a very high esteem. In the 1790s, however, the British reaction to the French Revolution had a remarkable impact on the popular images of women. In the wake of the *terreur*, the beheading of the French King and the declaration of war against Great Britain, any change in the social and political hierarchy became highly suspect, and women who insisted on a good education or showed their intellectual competence were denounced as bluestockings. They were still not thought to be devoid of any civilising influence, but they were relegated to a position of minor importance, and the characteristics that were ascribed to them once again left no doubt about their 'natural' inferiority.

Changes in the Attitudes towards Men and Women

The far-reaching changes in the conception of human nature began in the late seventeenth century and were ushered in by the writings of latitudinarian clergymen and the third Earl of Shaftesbury, who rejected the traditional negative view of man. Earlier religious beliefs, which postulated that man was still under the spell of original sin, and the precepts of civic humanism, which emphasised that the drive for power was insatiable and that the passions of man had to be governed by superior reason, shared the conviction that the nature of man was evil. From the late seventeenth century onwards, however, one can observe a gradual move away from the assumption of man as an evil, corrupt, and egocentric being, and a concomitant belief in a more positive view of man as having natural impulses to altruism, social emotions, and even a 'moral sense.' Feelings were increasingly held to be socially valuable emotions that should be expressed, rather than passions that had to be curbed. The new conception of man, therefore, involved a redefinition of both reason and feelings.

2 The lower classes, often referred to as 'mob' or 'rabble,' were commonly regarded as licentious, irrational, and unable to govern either their passions or their behaviour. See Nünning, 1995, 25.

Shaftesbury's ideas about the social passions that characterised the *animal sociale* were taken up during the course of the century, and benevolence as well as feelings conducive to the well-being of others were increasingly held to be natural features of human nature. Philosophers such as David Hume and Adam Smith shared the belief in the positive functions of 'passions' like charity, humanity, and pity, which were now thought to be characteristic of man. Delicate emotions thus came to be regarded as the most important attribute of human beings; even Lord Karnes, who believed in the harsh doctrines of civic humanism, was convinced that "[m]an is distinguished from the brute creation, not more remarkably by the superiority of his rational faculties, than by the greater delicacy of his perceptions and feelings" (Karnes, 1967, II: 3).[3]

During the second part of the century, as the culture of sensibility gained ground, 'delicate,' 'refined,' or 'tender' emotions came to be of overall importance. Handbooks for domestic medicine conveyed the idea that sensitive nerves led not only to a sharp intellect, but also to refined feelings (see Mullan 205-213). This assumption of the positive qualities of tender emotions was accompanied by a denigration of the formerly all-persuasive power of reason. Because people did not believe that a refined and civilised people like the British were characterised by strong antisocial passions, reason lost its role of governing those passions.[4] More than that, since the emotions allegedly natural to man tended to promote the happiness of others, even moral decisions fell more and more into the province of feelings. As David Hume had it: "Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions" (Hume, 1896, 415). Increasingly, human fellow-feelings were regarded as the basis of morality; reason should only calculate the means in order to procure the desired end. The new importance of (redefined) emotions was therefore matched by a lower estimation of reason.

This new conception of man had ethical and ultimately political implications. Sensibility, which was defined as that acuteness of feeling that gives rise to sympathy, was cherished because it induced benevolence and thus virtue. This made sensibility all the more valuable, for by the second part of the century, benevolence was regarded as the crucial characteristic of human beings and had come to be the most esteemed virtue. The politician and linguist Thomas Sheridan, the novelist Henry Fielding, and Lord Karnes all agreed with Adam Smith that "to indulge our benevolent affections, consti-

3 Quite a number of Englishmen and -women believed that "a sympathy of affections [is] this which distinguishes man [...] from the rest of the animal creation" (Burton 247). For a more detailed account of the change in the perception of human nature, see Nünning, "Die Entdeckung der Humanität..." (1994a).

4 Thus Lord Karnes claimed, "in a polished society instances of irregular passions are rare" (Karnes, 1967,1: 222 and 254). Adam Smith agrees; he also thinks that there are "social passions" (Smith, 1976b, 38).

tutes the perfection of human nature" (Smith, 1976b, 38).[5] Moreover, many conduct books stressed the importance of benevolence, which contained "the principle of every moral duty" (Macaulay 112).[6] Therefore sensibility and all the 'refined' feelings that went along with and, it was thought, called forth benevolence came to be markers of the individual's worth as a human being; therefore, they had a high moral value. In the second half of the eighteenth century, Scottish moralists began to propagate the idea that 'sympathy' was a moral tool, and private sensibility became the *conditio sine qua non* of public morality.[7] As a consequence, demonstrating one's sensibility and sympathy became a way to prove one's moral worth.

The reassessment of feelings which accompanied the new conception of human nature had a profound impact on the standing of women. After all, sensibility was explained with reference to psychological as well as physiological factors; the state of one's 'nerves' was thought to be responsible for the acuteness of perceptions and feelings. An extreme delicacy, acuteness and receptivity of nerves was regarded as a privilege of middle- and upper-class women, whose very bodies were held to be quite different from the blunt, muscular, and strong bodies of the lower classes. Thus, in the eighteenth century the faculties and characteristics valued most highly were mainly associated with women, not with men. After all, women were reputedly characterised by their "superior delicacy [...] modesty [...] natural softness and sensibility" (Gregory 4).[8] The profound transformations in the conception of human nature were therefore highly advantageous to women, who were now deemed to be 'naturally' closer to perfection: "[T]heir *natural* dispositions are certainly more favourable to piety and virtue" (Bennett, 1793b, 68).[9]

Private Virtues - Public Benefit: Women Teaching Virtue

With regard to women's role in the process of civilization, it is of crucial importance that both sympathy and benevolence could supposedly be learned, and that the only place where one could acquire these highest virtues was

5 Borinski regards benevolence as the central ideal in the English Enlightenment (Borinski 45).

6 See James Burgh's chapter in his conduct book (Burgh, 1812, 250ff.).

7 See, for instance, Dwyer 60-63 and 98, and Fiering 195-218 and 200-205.

8 Women's "greater delicacy" is also stressed by More (More, 1835a, 333).

9 See also the following remark: "Women, in this respect [education of the heart], have every claim to a marked *superiority*" (Bennett, 1793b, 68). Thus Catharine Macaulay could provocatively parody Alexander Pope's opinion that "a perfect woman's but a softer man" by emphasising "that *a perfect man is a woman formed after a coarser mould*' (Macaulay 204; emphasis by Macaulay). Mary Wollstonecraft, however, still associates morality with manliness (Wollstonecraft, 1982, 227). The moral superiority of women is also stressed by William Duff (Duff 45).

the small circle of family and friends. According to moralists, the processes which induced feelings of sympathy and pity could be both triggered and strengthened by witnessing and experiencing human feelings. Thus the renowned clergyman and professor of rhetoric Hugh Blair advised both the young and old in his sermons to "voluntarily [go] into the house of mourning; by yielding to the sentiments which it excites, and mingling our tears with those of the afflicted, we shall acquire that humane sensibility which is one of the highest ornaments of the nature of man" (quoted in Dwyer 60).[10] Apparently, sensibility and sympathy were held to be similar to muscles which would be strengthened when employed more often. Building on John Locke's and David Hume's ideas of the importance of established trains of thought and associations, moralists like Hugh Blair or David Fordyce in- formed their readers that true virtue could be enhanced through daily and frequent intercourse with friends and neighbours. Moral cultivation was thus within the reach of every individual, provided that he or she was a member of a like-minded small social group. The proper school for virtue was, of course, the affectionate family, where women reigned supreme.

In order to understand why women were thought to be so important for the civilisation of mankind, one has to take into account four different - though interrelating - tendencies of the second half of the century, to which I will briefly refer in the following: The upgrading of the private circle and the concomitant downgrading of the area of politics; the growing scepticism with regard to universities and schools, which was accompanied by a redefinition of what education was all about; a general feeling of crisis, which was fuelled by different circumstances; and the growing popularity of the so-called culture of sentiment or sensibility.

Strangely enough, the numerous explanations for the redefinition of virtue in the eighteenth century do not take into account the spread of the values of sentiment, which came to be so important that the latter half of the century has also been called the "Age of Sensibility."[11] In order to appreciate the cultural transformations and especially the redefinition of the role of women, however, it is of crucial importance to remember that the esteem of sensibility, delicacy, tenderness, sympathy, and benevolence and the attendant downplaying of the function of reason were not just proclaimed by philosophers and moralists. Instead, these ideas were spread in numerous discourses and accepted even by Englishmen such as Samuel Johnson or James

10 See also Dwyer 96, 100f., and 104)

11 This is the title of a chapter in Paul Langford's *A Polite and Commercial People: England 1727-1783* (1989). Pocock has claimed that virtue was redefined in relation to the language of politeness and that good manners and civilised behaviour came to determine the moral worth of a person (Pocock, 1985,48-49), while Kramnick believes that virtue was redefined in terms of such attributes as hard work, frugality, and moderation (Kramnick 196 and 277-278). The importance of politeness and its relation to the tradition of civic humanism is discussed by Klein.

Boswell, who do not strike one as paragons of sensitivity (see Nünning, 2004, 107-126). The virtues which were allegedly more natural to women therefore enjoyed a high esteem and were very popular.

Moreover, virtue was in great demand in the second half of the century. There seemed to be ample reason for Scots and Englishmen to heed the many calls to improve their morals and manners, since there was a general sense of crisis, which was not confined to the periods of war - the Seven Years' War as well as the American War of Independence. On the contrary, there was a general fear that corruption was spreading and that the British Empire was destined to a fate similar to that of the Roman Empire, and was already on its way to destruction. The prejudices against luxury were still strong, and people watched the growing prosperity, the new manners, and the manifold opportunities for entertainment with suspicion. Although the traditional esteem of an agricultural society with its simple as well as frugal and hardy way of life was not in keeping with modem living conditions any more, it did not prove easy to discard the old convictions entirely and to wholeheartedly embrace the reality of a consumer society. John Brown was not the only one to rail against the manners of the time and to bring home to the British a sense of the "most dangerous" situation in a "*Crisis* so important and alarming" (John Brown 15).

This sense of crisis and the apparent necessity of reforms generated a debate about the current state of education, which should be improved in order to meet the multifaceted demands of a society in need of reform. This led to a change of attitudes towards classical learning, which lost its overall importance in the eighteenth century. Universities were criticised, and scholars ran the risk of being denigrated as pedants who could neither converse nor dance nor behave in a civilised way (see Sheridan 17).[12] This disapproval was not only due to the rather quaint curriculum and mores at the universities; it was also connected to a transformation in educational ideals. In contrast to former classics such as Niccolo Machiavelli's *II Principe* (1532) and Thomas Elyot's *The Boke Named the Governor* (1531), treatises no longer aimed at educating statesmen, clergymen, or scholars. Instead, in accordance with the new values and the definition of man as an *animal sociale*, questions of conduct gained a wider currency. Even 'commonwealthmen' such as James Burgh wrote educational treatises which took questions of behaviour into account (see Burgh, 1812). The 'education of the heart,' which involved both manners and morals, gained paramount importance.

This 'education of the heart' could only take place in the private and social circle, which enjoyed a much higher esteem than ever before. The new

12 See also Adam Smith, who praised female education because it was not encumbered by the old traditions: "There are no publick institutions for the education of women, and there is accordingly nothing useless, absurd, or fantastical in the common course of their education'' (Smith, 1976a, 781).

appreciation of the 'private sphere' was matched by the fact that both the realm of politics, which had been at the centre of noble aspirations since ancient times, and the tradition of 'civic humanism' lost much of their prestige during that period.[13] This had a profound impact both on the standing of women and on the assessment of their civilising influence, for, according to this tradition, man was defined as *zoon politikon.* Self-fulfilment could only be achieved by the independent citizen actively participating in politics, and the worth of a human being was judged according to his political standing. Women could therefore not take part in the activities that were valued most highly; instead, they were held to be selfish, licentious, and potentially dangerous. Within this system of values, women were even regarded as obstacles to virtuous behaviour, for they were prone to persuade men to lay aside their duty - the highest of which was sacrificing their lives for the good of their country - in order to selfishly care for their families.[14] In addition, the harsh virtues of martial valour, self-restraint, rational command of one's passions, and self-sacrifice for the common good, which had been highly esteemed by 'commonwealthmen,' were characteristics which in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries were looked upon as features of men of the higher classes and considered unattainable by women. But the old 'manly' virtues of civic humanism were neither compatible with the new view of man as "an Animal formed for and delighting in Society'' (Fielding 119) nor with the high esteem of sensibility, benevolence, and with the private circle in which these virtues were practised. Even the sturdy commonwealthman Joseph Priestley conceded in his renowned *Essay on Government* (1768) that politics was not the most important area any more: "Now, of all the sources of happiness and enjoyment in human life, the domestic relations are the most constant and copious. [...] For the enjoyments which result from this most delightful intercourse, all mankind, in all ages, have been ready to sacrifice every thing" (Priestley, 1972a, 48).[15]

The decline of civic humanism was therefore one of the factors that made it possible for women to claim social prestige and to be accepted as the sex that was 'naturally' more inclined to virtue than men were. This in turn gave rise to the idea that women were meant to civilise men - that they could play an important part in modifying the harsh passions of men. This idea had already been voiced by Joseph Addison, but during the course of the century nearly all conduct books came to stress the positive influence that women were held to exercise over men. Domesticity was thought to be an important characteristic of both sexes, but, because of their 'natural' character traits, it was women's role to improve men's morals. At the end of the

13 For a short sketch of the changes in the common assessment of civic humanism and luxury in relation to women, see Nunning, 1994b and 2002.

14 The magisterial account of civic humanism is still Pocock, 1975.

15 See also Gordon/Trenchard: "Happiest of all Men, to me, seems the private Man" (Gordon I: v).

century, Priscilla Wakefield summed up the situation succinctly, stating that "[women's] influence over the other sex is universally acknowledged'' (Wakefield 69),16 and James Fordyce granted them not only a civilising influence over husbands and family, but also over larger gatherings: "How often have I seen a company of men who were disposed to be riotous, checked all at once into decency by the accidental entrance of an amiable woman'' *(Sermons to Young Women*, quoted in Spencer 17).

Women's Role within the 'Private Sphere'

But what exactly were women meant to achieve, apart from the all-important task of making men more virtuous? In fact, there were several functions women should fulfil, and not the least among them was to teach men manners. The contemporary importance of manners cannot be overrated, for they were of vital economic, social, and moral significance. First, there was the pragmatic need for the teaching of manners, as the growth of the middling ranks implied that there were quite a number of people who were newly rich, whose parents or grandparents had belonged to the poorer segments of society and who had not been used to any of the new luxuries and refined ways of behaving. They - as well as those who wanted to keep up with the changing fashions - needed to polish their manners in order to show by their lifestyle that they belonged to fashionable society. This may seem insignificant to modem eyes, but one has to remember that even public figures like George Washington had to acquire polite ways of behaving by copying maxims - like not to sleep when others speak or not to show oneself glad at an- other's misfortune or to dress modestly - into his commonplace book in order to memorise and learn them.[17] The growth of a consumer society changed living conditions and daily routines. The availability of glasses, knives, forks, tableware, and especially of the equipment for making tea - which apparently puzzled a good many contemporaries, who at first tried to chew the tea leaves - made it necessary to learn polite manners in order to gain or retain social standing.[18]

Secondly, refined manners were highly valued because they made life pleasant. John Bennett's explanation of this new value of politeness would have been approved of even by serious and learned men like Locke or James Burgh: 'True politeness gives a *lustre* to all our good qualities. [...] Leam-

16 See also Dwyer 117-119.

17 See Washington, "Rules of Civility and Decent Behaviour in Company and Conversation": "Sleep not when others Speak, Sit not when others stand"; "Let your countenance be pleasant but in serious matters somewhat grave" (Washington 3-4).

18 The relationship between consumer behaviour and the change in manners is discussed by Barker-Benfield 77ff. The material changes in the living conditions are pointed out by Shammas 119-193.

ing, riches, station, talents, genious, *without* it, are overbearing and insufferable, or at least may be very *awkward* and unpleasing" (Bennett, 1793a, II: 7).[19] Good breeding or politeness were meant "to contribute as much as possible to the Ease and Happiness of Mankind" (Fielding, 1743,1: 142).[20]

Thirdly, polite manners were of overall importance for the development of a positive self-image of the middling ranks, which ultimately involved a claim to superiority over both the lower and the upper classes.[21] At the beginning of the century, of course, it was not even clear whether the middling ranks could maintain the title of 'gentlemen' and 'gentlewomen.' Steele's definition in *The Tatler* in 1710 - "The appellation of a Gentleman is never to be affixed to a man's circumstances but to his behaviour in them" (August 1710, 113)[22] - had shown the way, but it was not accepted all at once. And the claim to good manners alone could not support the general feeling that the middling ranks were the most valuable and happy members of society. As David Hume put it: "The middle station, as it is most happy in many respects so particularly in this, that a man placed in it can, with the greatest leisure, consider his own happiness, and reap a new enjoyment, from com- paring his situation with that of persons above or below him" (Hume, 1906, 411). Although manners were of central importance for the social standing of the middling ranks, it was difficult to use them as a marker of superiority, for they were, after all, copied from aristocratic ways of behaving. During the eighteenth century, however, a new definition of polite manners became popular, a definition that transformed them on a middle-class basis.

This transformation took place within the framework of values characteristic of the culture of sentiment and was achieved by placing emphasis on

19 See also Locke, 1968, 190.

20 See also Chesterfield's advice to his son: "The first principle of this good-breeding is never to say any thing that you think can be disagreeable to any body in company" (Chesterfield I: 286).

21 For a more detailed account of this process, see Nunning, 1995.

22 The *London Magazine* thus differentiated between the gentleman *de facto*, who might have lots of vices and was indistinguishable from the lower sorts in point of morals, and the true gentleman, to whom the title *de jure* belonged: "viz., a man of generosity, politeness, learning, taste, genius, or affability" *(London Magazine*, August 1763, 306-307). Penelope Corfield demonstrates that, in the late eighteenth century, it was possible for rich tradesmen to use the title "esquire," and prosperous merchants could by then gain access to polite assemblies (Corfield 43). She also shows that during the eighteenth century there was an indirect literary and cultural pressure on the climate of public opinion to define personal gentility in terms of individual morality and merit. Views about who was or was not a gentleman differed, however. In his renowned commentaries of the laws of England, William Blackstone still held on to the definition that gentlemen do not have to work; commonwealthmen were of a similar opinion. Adam Ferguson, for instance, claimed: "We look for elevation of sentiment, and liberality of mind, among those orders of citizens, who, by their condition, and their fortunes, are relieved from sordid cares and attentions" (Ferguson 311). See also Pocock, 1981,360.

truth and honesty, which came to be regarded as specific traits of the middling ranks. Virtually every middle-class author asserted that dishonesty and dissimulation "should never be mentioned but with detestation" (Vicesimus Knox 128).[23] The high regard in which candour and honesty were held was partially due to the popularity of the culture of sensibility, for the man of sentiment distinguished himself by being naturally benevolent and tender, not by scheming and trying to get the better of others.[24] The insistence on truth also led to a criticism of the traditional values of the higher ranks, which was fuelled by the ambivalent public reception of the letters of Lord Chesterfield, written in order to teach Chesterfield's natural son, Philip Stanhope, how to become a polite gentleman. These letters, which were posthumously published by a shrewd relative, quickly ran through several editions. Despite their commercial success, however, they were only rarely mentioned without a good deal of harsh criticism. This very ambivalent popular reaction resulted from the fact that, even though they were an excellent guide to good manners, the morality of the letters ran counter to the ideals of truth and honesty. Although Chesterfield recommended highly refined manners, he made it quite clear to his son that polite behaviour was ultimately intended to serve one's own interests: "A man of sense, and of knowledge of the world, will assert his own rights, and pursue his own objects, as steadily and intrepidly as the most impudent man living, and commonly more so: but then he has art enough to give an outward air of modesty to all he does" (Chesterfield III: 125).[25] Because of such passages, many readers concluded that the polite manners Chesterfield was trying to teach were basically dissimulation.

The criticism of Chesterfield's letters did not, however, lead to a wholesale rejection of polite manners. In contrast to Germany, where the hastily produced translation of the letters fell flat largely because of the implied lack

23 See also Burgh, 1812, 56, and Wollstonecraft, 1982, 214.

24 Honesty was also an important characteristic of German and American sentimental culture; see, for instance, Fliegelman 119-124.

25 See also Chesterfield's evaluation of polite rules of behaviour: "There are a thousand foolish customs of this kind, which, not being criminal, must be complied with, and even chearfully, by men of sense. Diogenes the Cynic was a wise man for despising them; but a fool for showing it" (Chesterfield I: 305). For the public reception of Chesterfield's letters, see Langford 586-587 and 590. Thus, a reviewer, who had praised the abundant advice on rules of behaviour, castigated the attitude behind them: "His four volumes may be entitled, An entire Code of *Hypocrisy* and *Dissimulation*, containing the *finesse*, the artifice, the craft [...] with all the external accomplishments necessary to form the character of the complete courtier" (*London Magazine*, April 1776, 211). The *London Magazine* also cited Samuel Johnson's verdict on the *Letters*, which was, as usual, poignant and direct: "Dr. Johnson hath cynically said, that they [Chesterfield's letters] are only fit to form the morals of a whore, and the manners of a dancing master" (*London Magazine*, December 1774, 590).

of morals, the English audience continued to buy the immoral work.[26] This should not be put down to the alleged hypocrisy of the British, for the middling ranks had come up with an ingenious solution to the problem of polite manners: English education manuals assured their readers "that politeness is compatible with sincerity" (Burton 185).[27] They even defined polite manners in a way that was based on sincerity, for refined manners were regarded as a reflection of benevolent emotions. The poet and essayist Catherine Talbot, for instance, described politeness as "the consequence of a benevolent nature, which shews itself to general acquaintance in an obliging unconstrained civility, as it does to more particular ones in distinguished acts of kindness" (Talbot, 1780, 84).[28] Polite manners thus became the touchstone of human worth and virtue.

Politeness was therefore transformed into a very desirable commodity: It (im)proved one's social status and one's delicacy as well as one's virtue, and it could be used to claim moral superiority over the other, allegedly less fortunate ranks of society. This reflected favourably on women because there was a unanimous agreement that, due to their 'natural' qualities, they were the ones who had to teach men polite manners. Even Chesterfield, whose cynical view of women was severely criticised on both sides of the Atlantic,[29] had conceded that "if a man has not received the last polish from women [...] he will never be amiable," and that "[w]omen are the only refiners of the merit of men" (Chesterfield III: 167). In the context of the high regard paid to manners and morals, the common opinion that women were

26 The reception of Chesterfield's *Letters* in Germany is analysed in a study on the meaning of hypocrisy and dissimulation in Germany; see Geitner 48-49. The German translation of Chesterfield's *Letters* appeared in the years 1774-1777.

27 See Bennett, who condemns Chesterfield's polite dissimulation, but praises politeness "if it springs from principle, from a real desire of pleasing" (Bennett, 1793a, II: 5).

28 Wollstonecraft even claimed that real politeness was not to be found among the nobility, but constituted a genuine characteristic only of the middling ranks: "How bewitching is that humble softness of manners which humility gives birth to, and how faint are the imitations of affectation! That gentleness of behaviour, which makes us courteous to all, and that benevolence, which makes us loth to offend any, and studious to please every creature, is sometimes copied by the polite; but how aukward is the copy!" (Wollstonecraft, 1989, 14).

29 Chesterfield's opinion was anything but flattering: "Women, then, are only children of a larger growth; they have an entertaining tattle, and sometimes wit; but for solid, reasoning good sense, I never knew in my life one that had it [...]. A man of sense only trifles with them" (Chesterfield II: 92). His reviewers were of a different opinion and criticised Chesterfield's lack of knowledge: "[F]or women, such as have lately added to the literary lustre of the present age, are beings which Lord Chesterfield never knew; his acquaintance with that sex was all gallantry and flattery; [...] he had no idea of merit in them, and he never sought for what he did not suppose existed" (Anonymous review in the *Gentleman's Magazine and Historical Chronicle* 44 (July 1774): 321). Mercy Otis Warren was also explicit in her criticism of Chesterfield's opinion of women; see Hayes 616-621.

"designed to soften our hearts and polish our manners" (Gregory 3) implied a high esteem of women as agents of civilization.[30]

When Chesterfield said that (preferably French) women had to give men 'the last polish,' he had adults in mind. But the task of educating young children was perceived to be at least as important as the refinement of adults. As John Locke had argued, all human knowledge derived from ideas based on impressions which reached the brain via the nerves (see Locke, 1975, 117-118),[31] and the first impressions were of vital importance to the development of a child. This view became immensely influential during the course of the century when the ideas Locke had developed in his *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) were taken up not only by philosophers like David Hume, but also by numerous writers of educational treatises. Joseph Priestley was not the only one to stress that "the impression which ideas make upon the mind does not depend upon the definitions of them, but upon sensations, and a great variety of ideas, that have been associated with them; and these associations require time to be formed and cemented" (Priestley, 1793, 48).[32] Because of his belief in the power of associations, which supposedly made it possible to 'train' a child to become virtuous (by inducing it to connect virtuous ideas and actions with pleasing thoughts), not only the rational faculties of a child but also the development of its character could be deeply imbued with its daily routines and the habits which it adopted during the first years of its life.

These beliefs were partly responsible for the transformations in the treatment of young children.[33] Because of the importance of early impressions, middle-class women were urged to nurse their children themselves. Though it took quite a while until women heeded that advice (see Bowers 157-162), the idea that mothers were responsible for the well-being and early education of young children became very popular. As Lord Karnes maintained, "[d]uring childhood, every object strikes the mind with the force of novelty; and the mind, soft like wax, yields to every impression, good or bad. To cherish the former and to prevent the latter, is the province of the mother; for [...] she is entrusted by Providence with the government of her children during their tender years" (Karnes, 1781, iii).[34] The early nursing and su-

30 See also Priestley, 1793, II: 290.

31 See also George S. Rousseau 141-145.

32 Lord Kames shared this opinion of the great importance of associations, which he discussed in a separate chapter of his educational treatise; see Kames, 1781, 299-301.

33 In most of the treatises on education, from the works of John Locke to those of Mary Wollstonecraft, parents were warned against the bad influence which allegedly stupid, irrational, superstitious, and dishonest servants were thought to exert on the children who came into contact with them (see Niinning, 1995, 25-26). Medical advice books also stressed the inferior quality of the milk of lower-class nurses.

34 See also: "[RJeason, religion, the thrilling of affection, the voice of nature, and the voice of God, the interests of society, the happiness of private life, the honour, the

pervision of children was thought to be of great social significance, as the character of the future citizen was allegedly moulded during his first years. The education in schools - which were often judged to be the breeding ground of corruption - came too late, and women were held to be more important teachers than schoolmasters or tutors.

In addition, Scottish writers such as Adam Smith, David Hume, William Robertson, and John Millar claimed that women were responsible for the spread of mores and morals, which were mostly learned at home. That "[f]ew articles concerning government are of greater importance, than good education" (Karnes, 1781, 20)35 came to be a commonplace which was accepted by republicans and radicals on both sides of the Atlantic. Conservative authors such as James Fordyce also asked British women to fulfil their political duties: "Why, ye daughters of Britain, are so many of you insensible to those brightest glories of your sex? Where is your love for your native country, which, by thus excelling, you might so nobly serve?" (Fordyce I: 30).

'Natural' Reformers of Society

Because of the social and political implications of virtues and manners, women were held not only to fulfil important functions within the 'private sphere,' but they were also increasingly regarded as the 'natural' reformers of society. After all, both manners and morals were thought to be responsible for the well-being of the country: "Among all these various Causes, none perhaps so much contributes to raise or sink a Nation, as the Manners and Principles of its People" (John Brown 13).[36] John Dwyer even thinks that "Scottish moralists after Fordyce would sometimes go so far as to imply that the ultimate responsibility for the integrity of the moral community rested with the female sex" (Dwyer 119).[37] Since the prejudices against luxury and the enjoyments that national riches brought with them abated only slowly, and many pointed to the fall of the Roman Empire, which was supposedly due to luxury and corruption, women's task of teaching virtue acquired some urgency.

dignity and *true policy* of woman - all say, that a *mother* should be the *preceptress of her children*" (Bennett, 1793b, 83). See also Burton: "This task has Providence assigned her" (Burton, 1799,1: 57).

35 See also Richard Price: "[N]othing is more necessary than the establishment of a wise and liberal plan of EDUCATION. It is impossible properly to represent the importance of this" (Price 50).

36 See also James Burgh: "The welfare of all countries in the world depends upon the morals of their people. [...] [W]hen their manners are depraved, they will decline insensibly, and at last come to utter destruction" (Burgh, 1971, III: 30).

37 See also John Brown 122, 127, and 133.

But it was more than politics that was involved. After all, the British prided themselves on their advanced state of civilisation. Authors like John Millar had only recently developed and popularised the idea of the different stages of the progress of society, and Great Britain came to be seen as the most refined and civilised nation. But Millar also made clear just who was responsible for this achievement: "[W]hen [men] have made some progress in arts, and have attained to a proportional degree of refinement, they are necessarily led to set a value upon those female accomplishments and virtues which have so much influence upon every species of improvement" (Millar 219). Earlier 'barbarian' societies, governed by brute force, had enslaved their women, but the British knew better and had finally accepted women as their "companions and equals," who moreover fulfilled the important role of advancing the process of civilisation.

Many of the ideas that were connected to the role of women as 'republican mothers' and 'natural' reformers of society were developed by writers of the 'Scottish Enlightenment,' but they became popular both in England and in America quite quickly. Female authors took part in disseminating these ideas, and, interestingly enough, women from opposite ends of the ideological spectrum for once shared the same opinion. The ultra-conservative Hannah More seldom had the pleasure of agreeing with the radical Mary Wollstonecraft, but they were of the same mind as far as the vital role of women as reformers of society was concerned. More, who clung to the by now conservative belief that women were less intelligent and rational than men and should not try to shine in fields reserved to the male sex, thought that the characteristics of women - their empathy, modesty, self-discipline, piety, and morality - made them important agents of moral and social improvement: "The prevailing manners of an age depend [...] on the conduct of women: this is one of the principal hinges on which the great machine of human society turns" (More, 1835a, 338).[38] Mary Wollstonecraft, who thought with Catharine Macaulay that women were 'naturally' just as intelligent and rational as men, was also convinced that it was women's role to improve both manners and morals and thus ensure social and political progress.[39]

Concluding Remarks

In the late eighteenth century, therefore, the phrase 'civilising women' would not have been recognised as a pun either. But in contrast to the seventeenth

38 More therefore thought that to improve the education of women was a patriotic duty; see More, 1835b, 7.

39 See Wollstonecraft for her views on the importance of mothers and the necessity of improving the education of women (Wollstonecraft, 1982, 20f., 30, 67, and 160). Just as many other men and women, Wollstonecraft based her claims for a better education of women on their social and political importance.

century, it was by then assumed that women did have all-important civilising functions which were necessary for the development of both private morality and public welfare. Since I have focussed on contemporary attitudes and beliefs which turned out to be favourable to women, I would now like to briefly address the question of whether women actually performed the functions that were assigned to them. Some of their activities are, of course, impossible to measure. It cannot be said for sure, for instance, whether women's role within the family and bringing up young children actually had a civilising effect, and how important their behaviour was with regard to improving the morals and ensuring the welfare of the nation.[40] Instead, it is worthwhile to remember that the legal and economic position of women in society - which was mainly characterised by their lack of rights - did not improve. In spite of elaborate discussions in popular magazines and pamphlets, women acquired no legal rights during the century, and there were practically no professions open to them.

On the other hand, women participated in several endeavours meant to improve the state of society. In many respects, they were actively engaged rather than passively resigned to their fate: They proved their loyalty to Great Britain - or its colonies - during times of political crisis; they founded patriotic organisations supporting the wars against France, or published political pamphlets which put forth radical ideas like the 'rights of man'; they wrote works meant to further humanitarian reforms and the abolition of slavery as well as educational treatises and history books; they translated and reviewed books; they joined in the ongoing debate about the canonisation of literature and literary as well as artistic standards; they wrote works of literature, which - at least ostensibly - were intended to have educational value; they attended cultural events like operas, concerts, theatre performances, and exhibitions; and they engaged in a broad range of social charities. Drawing upon the ideas sketched above, they later formed associations, tried to help the 'deserving' poor, battled against alcoholism, and fought for political rights. It should not be forgotten, moreover, that it was a woman's idea to celebrate the birthday of the reigning monarch and thus strengthen feelings of loyalty. The very scope of their activities therefore shows that women did indeed try to influence the morals and manners of their times and to improve the state of society.

The success of their activities is difficult to gauge, especially since, in the more restricted atmosphere of the nineteenth century, many of the privileges that women had done so much to gain were lost again. But even though the

40 The very number of statements which exhort women to mind their duties at home seems to suggest that it was not easy to persuade all of the women of the middling and upper ranks to stay at home and fulfil their allegedly civilising functions. At the end of the century authors like Lord Karnes, James Fordyce, and Mary Wollstonecraft still complained about the fact that "our women of fashion, neglecting domestic concerns, seem to think every hour lost that does not pass in a crowd" (Chapone II: 5).

achievements of the eighteenth century proved to be short-lived, the knowledge of the developments of the nineteenth century and the difficult path to women's rights should not blind us to the opportunities that suddenly opened up in the late eighteenth century. Although the implications of the values of sensibility later proved to be 'mind-forged manacles' confining women to the - by then 'sacred,' but nonetheless belittled - home and hearth, in the eighteenth century they served to enhance the standing of women and enlarge their sphere of influence.

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