DEPARTAMENTO DE HISTORIA I

UNIVERSIDADE DE SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA

LOS ORÍGENES DE LA HISTORIOGRAFÍA FEMINISTA — HISTORIOGRAPHICAL ANALISYS OF WILLIAM ALEXANDER'S *HISTORY OF WOMEN* —

EULALIA SIMAL IGLESIAS

Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres:
Turkish Bath

A mi abuela Carmen

Resumen

Esta tesis doctoral tiene como objetivo examinar el contexto historiográfico de la obra de William Alexander, *La historia de las mujeres. De la más temprana antigüedad al tiempo presente*. Hasta el momento, se ha prestado poca atención a este libro, quizás a causa de su naturaleza contradictoria y de su extensión. A diferencia de muchos de los historiadores de su tiempo, que analizaron en sus trabajos la situación de las mujeres como un hito del proceso de civilización, Alexander no pertenecía al ámbito académico, no dejó ninguna otra obra de tipo histórico y recibió escaso reconocimiento en su día. Por ello, todavía sabemos muy poco acerca de William Alexander, cuyas circunstancias vitales han sido investigadas principalmente por Jane Rendall.

William Alexander nació posiblemente en Halifax en 1742. En los años 60 del siglo dieciocho, estudió en la Escuela de Medi-

cina de Edimburgo, donde seguramente acudió a las clases de medicina impartidas por William Cullen. Tras pasar unos años en el ejército y como médico en Edimburgo, se doctoró en medicina en 1769. Aunque con toda probabilidad ejerció en Londres durante la mayor parte de su vida profesional, Alexander mantuvo fuertes vínculos con Escocia. Mantuvo correspondencia con destacadas figuras de la vida cultural escocesa, como Alexander Monro senior, quien pudo haber sido su mecenas, y fue admitido en la Medical Society (1765) y en la Royal Society de Edimburgo. También sabemos que realizó varias investigaciones médicas acerca de Edimburgo, las cuales, además, fueron discutidas en las asociaciones culturales de la ciudad. Todavía sabemos menos sobre los últimos años de su vida y sobre su muerte, que pudo haber ocurrido en 1788.

Su obra *Historia de las mujeres* fue publicada en Londres en 1779. Consta de dos volúmenes y su organización en capítulos es temática, en lugar de cronológica. Cada capítulo (o conjunto de capítulos) se centra en una cuestión en concreto, que es tratada cronológicamente, examinando sus variaciones a lo largo del tiempo y en distintas sociedades. En el primer tomo, Alexander incluyó capítulos tales como "Esbozo de la historia antediluviana de las mujeres", "Sobre la educación femenina", "Sobre las ocupaciones y las diversiones de las mujeres", "Sobre el tratamiento, condición, ventajas y desventajas de las mujeres en la vida salvaje y en sociedad", "Acerca del carácter y la conducta de las mujeres", "Sobre los efectos de la compañía femenina" y "Esbozos acerca de las ceremonias y costumbres propias de las mujeres". En el segundo tomo, se incluyen los capítulos siguientes, "Sobre la delicadeza y la

castidad", "Acerca de las variadas opiniones que profesan distintas naciones respecto a las mujeres", "Sobre el vestido, adornos y otros métodos a través de los cuales las mujeres realzan su atractivo ante los hombres", "Acerca del cortejo", "Sobre el matrimonio", "Sobre el celibato" y "Sobre la viudedad". El libro termina con un apéndice centrado en la sociedad contemporánea a Alexander: "Una breve consideración acerca de las leyes y costumbres más materiales, con respecto a las mujeres de Gran Bretaña". Por tanto, el libro se ocupa de una gran variedad de temas: la condición de las mujeres en las sociedades actuales, comparándola con su situación en las sociedades primitivas, la naturaleza femenina y sus principales virtudes, la familia, el noviazgo, y las costumbres, vestido y educación femeninas.

La *Historia de las mujeres* no sólo describe la evolución de la condición femenina a lo largo de la historia sino que también se ocupa de la naturaleza femenina y sus facultades, de la relación entre mujeres, progreso y virtud, y de la posición de las mujeres en la articulación de las esferas de lo privado y lo público. Así pues, el libro puede considerarse un valioso ejemplo de los diferentes discursos e ideas que definían las relaciones y nociones de género en el siglo dieciocho. Su producción histórica contribuye al conocimiento de los vínculos existentes entre las transformaciones historiográficas y la formación de identidades de género. Además, hemos de destacar que se trata de la primera historia de las mujeres, en la que las mujeres son el sujeto histórico principal, consideradas en cuanto a su género, alejándose así de las antologías de mujeres ilustres que caracterizaron la Edad Moderna. El interés historiográfico del libro reside, asimismo, en la variedad de temas

que trata y de fuentes empleadas, que denotan la deuda de William Alexander con su contexto historiográfico más inmediato, el de la Ilustración escocesa, y con desarrollos historiográficos contemporáneos inspirados en las ciencias naturales y centrados en la consecución de una ciencia del hombre. Finalmente, el libro refleja los debates del siglo dieciocho acerca de nociones de género, las mujeres y su papel en la sociedad, que abarcaban desde argumentos proto-feministas, en pro de la igualdad, a la transformación de nuevas y viejas ideas en definiciones normativas del ideal femenino y de la función de las mujeres en la sociedad.

Para examinar el contexto en el que la obra fue producida, hemos utilizado dos enfoques básicos. En primer lugar, se procederá a analizar las circunstancias históricas contemporáneas a la obra, ocupándonos de la situación de las mujeres en la Gran Bretaña del siglo dieciocho y analizando la dialéctica que articula la formación de identidades nacionales que contribuyó a la integración de las distintas partes que formaban el Reino Unido, una unión que no estuvo exenta de tensiones.

Por otra parte, nos ocuparemos del contexto intelectual de la obra, centrándonos principalmente en la Ilustración escocesa, ya que la *Historia de las mujeres* debe considerarse uno de los mejores ejemplos de la historia conjectural, el paradigma historiográfico preferido por los autores escoceses. La vitalidad académica de la Escocia del siglo dieciocho proporcionó a Alexander ideas, inspiración y precedentes. Alexander, al igual que los historiadores conjecturales escoceses, creía que la condición de las mujeres constituía un indicio del nivel de progreso de la sociedad, consideró a las mujeres como sujetos históricos válidos y mostró en su obra una

tensión entre progresismo y conservadurismo. Aunque debemos reconocer que el contexto europeo es también relevante para esta investigación, un análisis en profundidad de los debates e ideas que tuvieron lugar en el continente respecto a las relaciones e identidades de género se halla fuera del marco de esta tesis doctoral. En consiguiente, la obra de William Alexander será examinada a la luz del desarrollo de la Ilustración escocesa, incidiendo en su elaboración de los roles de las mujeres en la sociedad, en sus formas de escritura de la historia y en su interpretación del discurso de la sensibilidad.

El primer capítulo tiene como objetivo acercarse a las vidas de las mujeres de la Gran Bretaña del siglo dieciocho, centrándose en su papel en la familia como madres y esposas y, al mismo tiempo, teniendo en cuenta las actividades públicas femeninas de tipo económico, laboral, educacional, político y social. Debido a procesos de distinto tipo, la situación de las mujeres en las décadas finales del siglo dieciocho se caracterizó por su inestabilidad y dinamismo, a consecuencia de los efectos de las transformaciones económicas derivadas de la revolución industrial, la influencia de sucesos de tipo político tales como la Guerra de Independencia americana, la agitación revolucionaria que precedió a la revolución francesa y los cambios sociales relacionados con la emergencia de las clases medias y su mentalidad burguesa.

Esta situación cambiante favoreció la producción de una obra como la de Alexander, centrada en el análisis de la evolución de la situación femenina en distintas sociedades y épocas. Además, la alteración de los modelos tradicionales de trabajo, ocio, vida familiar y sociabilidad provocó incertidumbres y temores acerca de la

articulación de las relaciones de género, estimulando el desarrollo de reflexiones de tipo filosófico e histórico sobre la naturaleza, deberes y condición femeninas. Se ha buscado una perspectiva de tipo global, en la que los ideales y deberes adscritos a las mujeres puedan interpretarse a la luz de las múltiples implicaciones de la noción de género, tanto de tipo privado como público.

El segundo capítulo trata de proporcionar una visión de conjunto sobre las dinámicas que articularon la formación de identidades nacionales en la Gran Bretaña del siglo dieciocho. Estos procesos determinaron la transformación de Gran Bretaña en una nación más cohesionada e influenciaron las relaciones de Escocia con la metrópolis y sus propias visiones de sí misma. Inquietudes de tipo patriótico contribuyeron en la evolución de los presupuestos ideológicos de la Ilustración escocesa, puesto que sus autores se hallaban profundamente interesados en el mantenimiento y el progreso de la comunidad frente a un mundo cambiante y en expansión, caracterizado por el desarrollo comercial e imperial. Al mismo tiempo, el ascenso de Gran Bretaña como potencia comercial e imperial provocó no pocas ansiedades en Escocia, respecto al crecimiento de la riqueza y a la inclusión de pueblos extraños dentro del Estado. Divididos entre a la conveniencia de aprovechar los beneficios que la Unión con Inglaterra ofrecía y aprehensiones respecto a los efectos negativos del lujo y el poder imperial, los autores escoceses procuraron la preservación de la comunidad frente a estos riesgos para la virtud mientras que, al mismo tiempo, sacaron partido de las nuevas fuentes de información disponibles gracias a un mayor contacto con sociedades no Europeas.

La inquietud sobre la protección de la virtud ante el crecimiento de la riqueza y el lujo tenía su contrapartida, entre los autores de la Ilustración escocesa, en los temores acerca de los riesgos potenciales de un exceso de familiaridad entre los sexos, que sin embargo, en su justa medida, consideraban beneficiosa para la sociedad, debido a la capacidad de las mujeres de transmitir a los hombres valores de empatía, sensibilidad y humanidad que les eran propios. Por otra parte, el proceso de anglicización que caracterizó la evolución de la sociedad escocesa con posterioridad a la Unión, por el cual Escocia adoptó patrones económicos, sociales y lingüísticos netamente ingleses, puede relacionarse con el valor que William Alexander adscribió en su obra a la situación que las mujeres británicas de su época disfrutaban. En la *Historia de las mujeres*, sus contemporáneas británicas disfrutaban de ventajas sin paralelo a lo largo de la historia y por tanto, y a pesar de ciertas críticas hacia algunos aspectos que debían mejorarse, tales como el matrimonio o los derechos legales, Alexander defendió la situación de las mujeres inglesas como el culmen del progreso femenino a lo largo de la historia, implícitamente aseverando la superioridad de su sociedad británica contemporánea en comparación con otras épocas históricas y países.

El tercer capítulo se centra en cuestiones relacionadas con la posición de las mujeres en la sociedad y la preservación de la virtud en el contexto de la Ilustración escocesa. En primer lugar, procederemos a realizar una síntesis de los orígenes, características y naturaleza de la Ilustración escocesa para a continuación examinar los principales discursos a través de los cuales los autores escoceses articularon su visión de la noción de feminidad, *i.e.* la defensa de la

moral pública y privada, sensibilidad, sociabilidad, domesticidad y el proceso de civilización. La Ilustración escocesa se caracteriza por un equilibrio inestable entre conservadurismo y progresismo, en el que las mujeres figuran al mismo tiempo como agentes civilizadores y como riesgo potencial que podría poner en peligro la base moral sobre la que debían basarse las relaciones entre los sexos y entre los miembros de la sociedad. Este compromiso, no exento de paradojas, resulta de la tensión entre los ideales ilustrados de igualdad y progreso, y la preocupación, característica de los ilustrados escoceses, por los peligros que amenazaban con corromper a los miembros de comunidad. De acuerdo con los historiadores escoceses, la influencia de las mujeres en la sociedad generaba numerosos beneficios. La naturaleza violenta de los hombres sería suavizada por efecto de la compañía femenina, mientras que la virtud pública y privada se veían fortalecidas gracias a la particular sensibilidad femenina, su función como agentes de sociabilidad y su posición como garantes de una vida familiar caracterizada por la domesticidad.

Estas contradicciones tienen su contrapartida en la *Historia de las mujeres* de William Alexander, a causa de la influencia de la Ilustración escocesa en la obra. Así pues, examinaremos la articulación de las ideas de la Ilustración escocesa en el libro, centrándonos en las tensiones que surgen de su interpretación de la naturaleza dual, conservadora y progresiva, típica de la Ilustración escocesa y que se vieron agudizadas por la adopción, por parte del autor, de muchas de las demandas a favor de la igualdad femenina, características del período. Alexander insistió, por una parte, en la asociación entre las mujeres y la cultura con el objetivo de defender el papel

beneficioso de las mujeres en el proceso de la civilización; sin embargo al mismo tiempo, Alexander mantuvo la identificación entre las mujeres y la naturaleza con el fin de recomendar las labores domésticas de madre y esposa como su deber fundamental y apoyar una doble moral que las situaba en una posición subordinada. Del mismo modo, Alexander excluyó a las mujeres del progreso de las artes y las ciencias, hitos clave el proceso de civilización. El desarrollo de sus facultades intelectuales, más allá de unos niveles modestos de aprendizaje, sólo podía tener consecuencias funestas para las mujeres, pues perderían su atractivo ante los ojos de los hombres y, debido a su exaltada sensibilidad y a su tendencia a la vanidad, fracasarían en sus esfuerzos intelectuales. En definitiva, la función positiva de las mujeres en la sociedad sólo será reconocida en tanto que sea consecuente con el respeto a las jerarquías de género, lo que implicaba para las mujeres matrimonios desiguales, códigos morales de tipo patriarcal y la exclusión de los derechos políticos, educación y vida profesional reivindicados por las feministas.

Cuestiones relativas a la metodología del libro serán tratadas en el cuarto capítulo de la tesis. Durante el siglo dieciocho se produjo un incremento notable en las investigaciones destinadas a profundizar en los misterios de la naturaleza humana a través del empleo de métodos y enfoques propios de las ciencias naturales. Esta tendencia cristalizó en un esfuerzo colectivo por establecer los principios de una ciencia del hombre, que pudiese explicar la evolución y desarrollo de las facultades humanas. Además de la influencia de la revolución científica, diversos factores (tales como las obras de pensadores modernos como Bacon o Locke, la evolu-

ción de la medicina y de la historia natural, la abundancia de escritos de viajeros y circunstancias de tipo social) contribuyeron a que este nuevo enfoque floreciese en el seno de la Ilustración escocesa, donde la indagación sobre la naturaleza humana recibió el nombre de historia conjectural. La historia conjectural se centró principalmente en la evolución del hombre en sociedad y adoptó los presupuestos de la ciencia de Newton, tales como racionalismo, secularismo, el procedimiento inductivo y el procedimiento deductivo, al tiempo que desarrolló instrumentos metodológicos propios, tales como el método comparativo, la búsqueda de causas generales y la teoría de los cuatro estadios. Sin embargo, y a pesar de sus reivindicaciones de imparcialidad, el proyecto conjectural se caracterizó por un énfasis normativo con implicaciones de tipo social, político y de género. La *Historia de las mujeres* de William Alexander hizo uso y compartió estos presupuestos básicos, que se emplearon, en su caso, para justificar una investigación de tipo conjectural centrada en las mujeres.

En el quinto y último capítulo, prestaremos atención al discurso de la sensibilidad, una ideología compleja que influyó decisivamente en la literatura, reivindicaciones proto-feministas y discursos sobre moralidad, medicina y género del siglo dieciocho. Una sensibilidad cultivada en su justa medida se consideraba la fuente de innumerables beneficios tanto para el individual como para la sociedad. La sensibilidad generaba impulsos morales, a través de las operaciones de la simpatía, suavizaba la ruda naturaleza masculina y favorecía una sociabilidad refinada, base de la vida social e incentivo para la virtud pública y privada. La popularidad del discurso de la sensibilidad dio lugar a una campaña por la reforma de

hábitos violentos y groseros tradicionalmente asociados con el ideal de masculinidad. En cuanto a las mujeres, se creía que éstas poseían una sensibilidad especial, que las inclinaba a la compasión y la benevolencia, y que por tanto su influencia era beneficiosa para los hombres y la sociedad. La literatura de la sensibilidad, al mismo tiempo, se centró en la exploración de la reconciliación de la pasión amorosa y las convenciones sociales, un tema especialmente relevante para las mujeres. Aunque una sensibilidad temperada se consideraba fuente de numerosos beneficios, esta cualidad también se contemplaba con aprensión, puesto que las excesos de la sensibilidad podían poner en peligro el desarrollo integral de hombres y mujeres, así como su interacción en sociedad. Los hombres corrían el riesgo de caer en el afeminamiento, mientras que las mujeres, debido a su exacerbada sensibilidad, eran propensas a excesos emocionales.

A través de una comparación entre la obra de William Alexander y *El legado de un padre a sus hijas* de John Gregory, buscaremos demostrar que la asociación de las mujeres con la sensibilidad fue empleada recurrentemente tanto para ensalzar los beneficios de la influencia femenina como para sancionar una doble moral distinta para los hombres y para las mujeres, rechazando las demandas feministas que reclamaban para las mujeres paridad de derechos y acceso a la esfera de lo público. Por lo tanto, y sin negar la influencia de los ideales ilustrados en la *Historia de las mujeres* de William Alexander, esta obra debe considerarse una combinación de historia conjectural y formas normativas características de la literatura de la conducta. Mientras que la historia conjectural tenía como objetivo trazar la evolución de las sociedades hacia

mayores cotas de progreso, señalando el importante papel de las mujeres en este proceso, la literatura de la conducta tenía como fin la protección del progreso conseguido, incluso a costa de sacrificar las reivindicaciones de igualdad entre hombres y mujeres y la naturaleza privilegiada de las mujeres a menudo presentes en el proyecto conjectural. Además, ambos géneros se centraban principalmente en conducir el deseo sexual masculino a través de prácticas e instituciones no exentas de matices patriarcales, asegurando así la reproducción de la sociedad sin poner en peligro su base moral.

El discurso de la sensibilidad fue utilizado en esta época para elaborar nuevas formas de leer la historia, que acercaron este género a las supuestas características naturales de las mujeres. A pesar de ello, tal y como demuestran las críticas que recibió la *Historia de las mujeres*, la creencia en una sensibilidad más delicada propia de las mujeres podía ser utilizada para censurar su acceso a obras históricas, al considerarlas perjudiciales para la delicada naturaleza de la mujer, restringiendo de esta forma su desarrollo intelectual.

Una de las metas de esta tesis doctoral ha sido poner de relieve el interés que la obra de William Alexander tiene para el estudio de la evolución de las relaciones de género, historia de las mujeres e historiografía. Esperamos que esta investigación contribuya no sólo al conocimiento de la obra sino también a poner de manifiesto la posición de relevancia que la *Historia de las mujeres* ocupa entre las primeras historias de las mujeres, señalando su lugar como precedente de investigaciones actuales en el terreno de los estudios de género relativas a las vicisitudes de la situación de las mujeres a lo largo del tiempo y del espacio.

Index

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS **1**

PREFACE **5**

1. WOMEN IN EIGHTEENTH CENTURY BRITAIN **23**

Visions of Womanhood 24

Courtship, Marriage and Domestic Life 28

Sexuality 56

Reproduction, Pregnancy, Childrearing and Education 66

Women at Risk 80

Women at Work 87

Rural Women 89
Urban Women 93
Women from the Middling Sort 101

Gentlewomen 106

The Enlargement of the Feminine Sphere 117

2. NATION, PROVINCE AND NATIONAL IDENTITY 129

Commerce, Empire and the Formation of Identities 138

The Cult of Commerce, Empire and Patriotic Discourses 141
The Cult of Commerce and Social Stability.....145

The 1760s and the 1770s.....152

Political Unrest.....157
Radical Politics 160
The American War 165

Integration, Improvement and Notions of Identity in Eighteenth Century Scotland.....175

North Britishness and the Mentality of Emulation.....176

A Collective Commitment to Improvement.....179
Anglicising Scotland 184
The Limits of Improvement.....190
The Margins of the North British Identity.....192

The Scottish Takeover of Britain 197
The Scots and America 202

Scotland and the American War.....207

Conclusion.....210

3. PRESCRIPTION AND PROGRESS 219

The Intellectual Background of William Alexander: The Scottish Enlightenment 221

The Ideology of Femininity in the Scottish Enlightenment: Morality, Sensibility, Domesticity and Civilisation.....233

Private and Public Virtue: Christian-Stoicism and Civic Humanism 233

Private Virtue: Christian-Stoic Morality.....233
The Defence of Public Virtue: Civic Humanism and Patriarchal Conservatism.....236

Sensibility and Sociability: The Moral Basis of the Community.....245
Domesticity, Women and Civilisation: Blurring Boundaries between Public and Private.....248

The Discourse of Domesticity.....248
Women in the Discourse of Domesticity.....251

The Discourse of Sensibility and the Civilising Process: Women in Conjectural History 255

Conservatism and Progressivism in the *History of Women* 263

Female Nature, Education and Duties: Equality vs. Sensibility 263
Female Progress: Civilisation and Refinement 269
The Protection of Virtue: Women and the Dangers of Progress 276
The Blurring of the Public/Private Distinction in the History of Women 285
The Reconciliation between Progressivism and Conservatism 288

4. HUMAN NATURE: THE BASIS OF THE CONJECTURAL ENQUIRY 295

Origin and Sources of the Eighteenth Century Scottish Science of Man 306

Early Modern Forerunners of Natural History: Bacon, Hobbes and Locke 307
Linnaeus and Buffon: Man and the Animal Kingdom 309
Environmentalism and Eighteenth Century Medicine 316
Science and Improvement: The Institutionalisation of Natural History in Scotland 323
Travel Literature 328

Conjectural History: The Science of Man in the Scottish Enlightenment 338

Basic Tenets and Underlying Assumptions 339
Methodology: Induction, Comparison, the Search for Causal Patterns and the Four Stages Theory 353

The Comparative Method 353
General Causes and Human Evolution 358
The Inductive Method 364
The Four Stages Theory 365

The Attack on the Contractualist Tradition. 380
The Normative Side of Conjectural History 390

The *History Of Women* and the Writing of Conjectural History 395

Main Sources and Influences 397
The History of Women as a Work of Natural History 402

5. SYMPATHY, SENSIBILITY AND THE REFASHIONING OF THE INDIVIDUAL SELF 419

Sensibility and Sympathy in the Scottish Enlightenment 431

Medical Discourses of Sensibility 445

The Novel of Sentiment and the Female Reader 451

The Dangers of Sensibility 469

Women in the Discourse of Sensibility 476

Conduct Literature and Alexander's *History of Women*. Channelling Feminine Sensibility 484

Sensibility and the Reformation of Male Manners 533

Sensibility and the Writing and Reading of History 551

CONCLUSION 559

REFERENCES 567

Acknowledgements

In spite of what is stated on the binding, a PhD thesis is rarely the product of the author's sole efforts. Besides the researcher, numerous persons contribute to the final outcome of her endeavour, whether helping her with their professional advice, providing her with financial support or simply by hearing her miseries over a pint of beer.

First of all I should recognise my debt with those who helped through the different stages of this thesis by giving academic as well as personal help. Jose Carlos Bermejo Barrera, director de la tesis, ha colaborado en su realización desde el principio. Su buen hacer como historiador y profesor contribuyó en gran medida a que al acabar la carrera optase por hacer un doctorado. No sólo me ayudó con la elección del tema de la tesis, al señalarme el valor historiográfico que la obra de Alexander posee, sino que me guió

por los vericuetos de la realización de una tesis doctoral, aconsejándome sobre la manera en la que proceder con la investigación. Además de leer los capítulos, ofreciendo consejo sobre cómo mejorarlos, ha sido un tutor paciente y comprensivo.

This research was conducted to a great extent in England where I was lucky to meet Dr. Jane Rendall, who accepted to supervise my work while I was there. She suggested the most suitable bibliography and stressed the relevance of the Scottish Enlightenment to understand William Alexander's book. She supervised my work through most of the elaboration of this PhD thesis, making useful suggestions and accurate corrections, which doubtlessly improved the final outcome of this research. I am most obliged for her encouragement, enthusiasm and kindness while her proficiency as a historian has been a constant source of inspiration.

I should turn now to the institutions whose financial support enabled the completion of this PhD thesis. In the first place, Xunta de Galicia, which funded my first doctorate years. Besides, I would like to state my gratitude to the Fundación Barrie de la Maza, which awarded me a scholarship in the year 2001 in order to complete a Master in Women's and Gender History at the University of York. I must thank them for the excellent background the Master provided me with as well as for the care and recommendations of their staff and members in front of the challenges of a year abroad. Similarly, I am indebted to the Fundación Caixa Galicia from which I received a scholarship to continue my research on Alexander for a second year in York.

Regarding England I must made extensive my thanks to many people who made of my stay there three of the best years of my life. Thank you Cristina and Yuji, for your encouragement, unabated cheerfulness and excellent Japanese food. Thank you Iria, for sharing my bouts of homesickness and for many beers, cigarettes and laughs. Thank you Corrado for your keenness for night time political discussion and your lessons on pasta cooking. Thank you Peter, Kris, Paola, Antonia and the rest, for many happy evenings in the Deramore Arms. And of course, thanks to the Greek bunch, Chrisy, Katerina and, especially, Panos, who has proven a faithful friend and the best music adviser.

Debo agradecer también el apoyo de mi familia y de los amigos de la terriña. A mis padres, su cariño y apoyo, sus muchos paquetes de comida que ayudaron a que sobreviviese los rigores de la cocina inglesa y su paciencia ante no pocos agobios. A mis hermanos Rubén y Fernando, mi secretario en España y representante en actos oficiales. A mis primos María, Alberto y Miguel, siempre preocupados por el bienestar de su primita exiliada, y a mis tíos Suso y Josefita, cuyo afecto y contribución al fluir de paquetes ha ser reconocido.

A Mónica y a Cristina, gracias por numerosos cafés de sobremesa y cervezas vespertinas. A Maite, polo seu alento e a súa teima co valor terapéutico da noite santiaguesa. A Marta, por unha amizade que permanece e mantense forte malia a distancia. A Xandra, polos seus consellos de experimentada doutora e polo seu apoio en momentos difíciles. No me olvido tampoco del resto de los compañeros de la facultad. Gracias Ferni (¡maruja!), Ana,

Roberto y Raquel, por vuestro buen humor y vuestra paciencia con mis cuitas de investigadora.

Por último, mi agradecimiento más sentido ha de ser para Jose, que no sólo nunca dudó de que esta tesis tendría un final sino que contribuyó decisivamente a que lo tuviese. No exagero al decir que sin él, probablemente esta investigación no hubiese llegado a su fin. Y en cualquier caso no habría disfrutado tanto en el proceso.

Preface

The rethinking of female nature and gender relationships in the eighteenth century was paralleled and prompted by its historical context. In this period the social, political and mental foundations of the *Ancien Régime* were challenged by processes of a very different nature. The language of rationalism undermined the sacredness of political and religious authorities such as the monarchy and the aristocracy. But the same discourses that were used against established structures could also be employed to argue against the subordination of women and the hierarchical order of the family, as the French Revolution showed. At the same time, economic processes, such as the creation of a worldwide sphere of commercial exchange and the onset of the industrial revolution, transformed the social structures, loosening the authority of the propertied classes, disrupting traditional family ties and fostering

the formation of the middle class and the emergence of the working class. The patriarchal structure of the family and gender relations had to be adapted owing to the incorporation of women to manufacture production, and to the increasing mobility of the population[1]. These changes weakened the authority of the husband and father over children, adolescents and women prompting the growth of educational literature, which explored new forms of controlling children and women.

Without denying the importance of economic, social and political processes, the evolution of notions of femininity and masculinity should be examined in the light of the transformation of ideas of gender, a unique historical category. In Britain, Dror Wahrman has identified the moment in which gender and sex were finally reconceptualised as fixed, ontological notions towards the end of the eighteenth century[2]. Before this transformation was widely sanctioned and although sex was no longer a sociological construct, gender was not yet considered a reflection of biology and thus, it could be constructed in changeable, fluid and yet

---

[1] For the formation of the early modern patriarchal ideology and its eighteenth century transformations, see Paula Miller, *Transformations of Patriarchy in the West, 1500-1900* (Indiana & Bloomington, 1998). A good case study of the workings of patriarchy in the early modern period is Cynthia Herrup, 'The Patriarch at Home. The Trial of the Second Earl of Castlehaven for Rape and Sodomy', *History Workshop Journal*, 41, (1996), pp. 117-141. For an exploration of the disruptive effects of the industrial revolution regarding gender relations, see Anna Clark, *The Struggle for the Breeches: Gender and the Making of the British Working Class* (Berkeley & Los Angeles, 1995).

[2] Dror Wahrman, '*Percy*'s Prologue: From Gender Play to Gender Panic in Eighteenth-Century England', *Past and Present*, 159, (1998), pp. 113-160. For the differences between pre-modern and modern sexual identities, see Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park, 'The Hermaphrodite and the Orders of Nature. Sexual Ambiguity in Modern France', *CLQ*, 1, (1995), pp. 419-438.

socially accepted ways. Women (and men) could be associated with different images in which normative gender identities were blurred, and, accordingly, a wider space for the discussion of these notions was allowed[3].

Nevertheless, eighteenth century controversies about women were not just the product of these particular historical features. They were indebted to a long-lasting tradition, the *querelle des femmes*, a debate dating from the fifteenth century in which learned women wrote against misogynist ideas about women's physical, moral, mental and spiritual inferiority[4]. In the eighteenth century, the spirit of the *querelle* could still be found in the writings of Poulain de la Barre and in Mary Astell's *Some Reflections upon Marriage* (1700), in which current political ideas were used to oppose the tyrannical authority of men in marriage. In her *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792)[5] Mary Wollstonecraft's efforts to rescue the true image of women and her denunciation of the biased opinions of established authorities were partially informed by the style of the writers of the *querelle*.

Alexander followed closely this tradition in several sections of his book. Like the writers of the *querelle*, he denounced the excessive authority of the husband in marriage and, as Mary Astell

---

[3] Wahrman, in his study of eighteenth century theatrical representations, showed that the female knight, orator, politician and the Amazon were images that could be associated with womanhood without conveying negative connotations. See Wahrman, 'Percy's Prologue".

[4] Joan Kelly, 'Early Feminist Theory and "the Querelle des Femmes", 1400-1789', in Joan Kelly (ed.), *Women, History and Theory* (Chicago, 1984), pp. 65-109.

[5] Mary Wollstonecraft, (1792) *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (Oxford, 1999).

had done before, he used the tyrant-slave dialectic to describe unjust marriage relationships. He also employed an account of women worthies (queens, learned and significant women of the past) to back his opinions supporting women's capacities. In a similar vein, he devoted two chapters of his book to contest negative opinions commonly held against women and misogynous contemporary writers such as Swift, Pope and Dr. Young[6]. Mental inferiority, lack of immortal souls and innate wickedness were misconceptions that Alexander wanted to refute and which were already present in the writings of the *querelle*.

The discourse of sensibility strongly informed eighteenth century gender ideas. Sensibility has been defined by Annie Van Sant as:

> an organic sensitivity dependent on brain and nerves and underlying a) a delicate moral and aesthetic perception; b) acuteness of feeling, both emotional and physical; and c) susceptibility to delicate passional arousal. Though belonging to all, greater degrees of sensibility – often to a point of fragility – are characteristic of women and upper classes. Excessive delicacy or acuteness of feeling produces an impaired or diseased state[7].

As this definition suggests, the workings of sensibility were not only associated with mental and psychological operations but

---

[6] William Alexander, (1782 ed.) *The History of Women. From the Earliest Antiquity to the Present Time* (Bristol, 1995), Vol. 2, chapters 18 and 19; see in particular p. 66 for the refutation of these writers' ideas.

[7] Quoted in Jane Rendall, 'Feminizing the Enlightenment: The Problem of Sensibility' in Martin Fitzpatrick, Peter Jones and Iain McCalman (eds.), *The Enlightenment World* (London, 2003).

also with the management of one's feelings at different levels, namely individually, socially, morally and even politically.

Contemporary medical notions stressed the role of sympathy and feelings in bodily operations and established differences in sensibility according to gender and class. A greater degree of sensibility was the product of an excess of refinement and wealth and also the distinctive characteristic of women who, as a result, had a tendency to frequent nervous disorders. Medical discourses stressed the biological differences between the sexes and women came to be increasingly defined by their reproductive functions[8]. Physical and emotional differences were closely intermingled. Women's reproductive role was identified with an acute sensibility and weakness, while men were, in comparison, defined by their strength and by a more restrained management of their feelings. In eighteenth century medical discourses the control of the passions was also associated with an increasing emphasis on the individual's management of health[9].

Literature also reflected the language of sensibility[10]. The eighteenth century witnessed a growth in the novels of sensibility both in France (Rousseau) and in England (Richardson). Even Scotland had its representative in Henry Mackenzie. These novels dealt with gender relations, especially the passion of love and its adaptation to married life. They explored the ways in which this discourse shaped normative notions of femininity and masculinity

---

[8] Rendall, 'Feminizing the Enlightenment'.

[9] See Dorinda Outram, *The Body and the French Revolution. Sex, Class and Political Culture* (New Haven & London, 1989).

[10] Rendall, 'Feminizing the Enlightenment'.

and struggled to resolve some of the problems posed by the emphasis on sensibility: to reconcile manliness and sensibility and to find a compromise between the excesses of feelings and marital and social conventions.

Another major field in which gender relations and issues of femininity were discussed was educational and prescriptive literature, which expanded rapidly in this period. Rousseau's *Émile* was the most influential educational book of the time. It merged many contemporary traditions (primitive naturalism, civic humanism, sensibility) with the aim of exploring the most suitable education for a man and for his female companion. In order to make Émile the perfect citizen of Rousseau's utopian republic, he should be educated following his natural tendencies and encouraging him to use reason as his main guide. In contrast, in the education of Émile's companion, Sophie, Rousseau used the more disciplining bias of the discourses of rationality, sensibility and civic humanism.

Due to her delicate sensibility and lacking rational capacities, Sophie was destined to domestic life and excluded from political existence. As a result, Sophie's education and behaviour was regulated by principles contrary to those intended for Émile. Instead of reason, modesty and propriety should be the guide of her behaviour, because they allowed her to control her more passionate nature, enabling her to be a pleasing and dutiful wife, both in Émile's eyes and, most importantly, in the eyes of the others. Therefore, while the discourse of sensibility resulted for Émile in a freer education and a proper blending of feelings and reason, it proved restrictive in Sophie's case, whose rationality and

autonomy were neglected. She should regulate and conceal her passions which, if unbound, would threaten the social order and be confined at home, allowing Émile to fulfil his political duties. Rousseau's *Émile* revealed how the language of sensibility was frequently used to deal with female sexuality and keep under control its potential dangers for society.

The place of Rousseau among his contemporary thinkers and the popularity of *Émile* led to his ideas being discussed and echoed in different books on female education. In Scotland, John Gregory closely followed Rousseau's ideas in his *A Father's Legacy to his Daughters*[11]. This book was not only a collection of paternal advices, but also a collection of regulations about female education and behaviour. As such, it exemplified one of the premises that the male biased discourse of sensibility implied for women: marital (and paternal) affection in exchange for the control of their potentially disordered sensibility. Gregory's book underlines that, as a consequence of the discourse of sensibility, the notion of imagination became strongly gendered in the eighteenth century debates about female nature[12]. On the one hand, women lacked the function of imagination linked with the production of works of art and literature which proved that their mental capacities were inferior to those of men. On the other hand, female imagination was easily excitable and therefore their 'unbridled imagination'[13]

---

[11] John Gregory, (1774 ed.) *A Father's Legacy to his Daughters* (New York & London, 1974).

[12] On eighteenth century gendered uses of imagination see Joan W. Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer. French Feminists and the Rights of Man* (Cambridge, Mass., 1996).

[13] Gregory, *A Father's Legacy*, p. 38.

should be kept under a close control, by avoiding romantic fictions and preventing in them the vice of vanity. Imagination played a chief role in courtship: women should inflame men's imagination to arise in them sentiments of love; however, at the same time, women's imagination should be especially restrained, otherwise it will bring only shame and disgrace to them.

The discourse of sensibility, Rousseau's ideas and the concern for moral regeneration could be understood in other ways in which female inferiority and domestic reclusion were challenged. Antoine-Léonard Thomas joined these issues together in his *Essai sur le caractère, les mœurs et l'esprit des femmes* (1771), a clear precedent of Alexander's book. Like Rousseau, Thomas placed gender relationships at the heart of the regeneration of current customs and ascribed different qualities and duties to each sex. However, he considered that female influence on society advanced morality and social pleasures through polite sociability and praised famous women of the past. Therefore, although he remarked that gender relations should be controlled and longed for a recuperation of the more simple and virtuous manners of the past, he did not share Rousseau's acute anxieties about female nature and portrayed a more positive picture of women and gender relations[14].

Madame d'Epinay carried further this criticism of Rousseau's ideas. While stressing the connections between the moral regeneration of society and the reform of male and female private and public behaviour, she rejected women's mental inferiority,

[14] See Mónica Bolufer Peruga and Isabel Morant Deusa, 'On Women's Reason, Education and Love', *Gender and History*, (1998), pp. 183-216.

encouraged the cultivation of their intellectual capacities and blamed men for degrading the intercourse between the sexes. Similarly, in Spain, Josefa Amar y Borbón and Inés Joyes y Blake denied female inequality and defended women's presence in public and social life[15].

New scientific research provided a ground for the defence of women's equality. From 1700 onwards, medical theories had neglected significant anatomical differences between the sexes and emphasised the contribution of both sexes to conception, dismissing female passivity in the reproductive process[16]. However, these theories had a limited impact on conventional medical discourses which, due to social and internal conventions, remained strongly attached to ideas of female inferiority.

The debate about female equality was also encouraged by female participation in public debates. In France, women's partaking in political affairs had already started before the Revolution through the *salonnières*' engagement in philosophical and literary discussions and through periodicals such as the *Journal des Dames* which commented upon political issues[17]. In Britain, female debating societies were created in the 1770s and, as we have seen, blurred gender images circulated in literary production[18]. Political theories, humanitarian campaigns (such as anti-slavery)

---

15 Bolufer Peruga and Morant Deusa, 'On Women's Reason'.

16 See Estelle Cohen, '"What the Women at All Times Would Laugh at". Redefining Equality and Difference, circa 1660-1760', *Osiris*, 12, (1997), pp. 121-142.

17 See Rendall, 'Feminizing the Enlightenment' and Joan B. Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca & London, 1996).

18 Wahrman, 'Percy's Prologue'.

and religious dissent could also be used to argue for women's autonomy. The eighteenth century expansion of printing culture not only facilitated the spread of political dissent but also widened the opportunities for women to have access to learning and current ideas[19].

In this milieu, after the publication of the *History of Women*, several writers took the side of women to support their equal capacities with men and even to defend their social and political equality. In her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), Mary Wollstonecraft confronted Rousseau's opinions[20]. She supported female equality with men at different levels, namely socially, morally and politically, and emphasised the necessity of female education on an equal footing with men's. Besides the mistaken education of women, Wollstonecraft denounced the encouragement of an excessive and artificial sensibility as the other main cause of the ills of women. Wollstonecraft herself in *Maria; or the Wrongs of Woman* (1798), as well as Mary Hays, used the novel of sentiment to reveal the concealment of women's right to sexuality in the discourse of sensibility[21].

However, after the publication of the *History of Women*, a conservative wave changed the conditions for debating women's situation. In Britain, it has been argued that a turning point from 'gender play' to 'gender panic' occurred in the 1780s in which 'the stakes increased in maintaining the conviction in gender categories

---

[19] Rendall, 'Feminizing the Enlightenment'.

[20] Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication.*

[21] See Mary Wollstonecraft, *Mary and The Wrongs of Woman* (Oxford & New York, 1998).

as absolute, in gender identities as fixed, in gender boundaries as stable and determined, and in apparent transgressions of those boundaries as fundamentally disruptive if not simply impossible'[22]. The events of the French Revolution, with its challenge to patriarchal authority in the household and the state, the disruptive effects of the American Revolution and the medical research on female biological equality, had brought about uncertainty concerning sexual difference[23]. Moreover, debates on female intellectual equality had clear political implications because speech and authorship were understood as sources of power and authority[24]. As a result, the preservation of social order became associated with the safeguarding of gender identities and, hence, the debates and claims for female equality were substituted by a reinforcement of gender difference, as the reactions to the publication of the *Vindication of the Rights of Women* proved.

It is the aim of this PhD thesis to examine the historiographical context of William Alexander´s *The History of Women. From the Earliest Antiquity to the Present Time*. Little attention has been paid to this book, perhaps due to its contradictory nature

---

[22] Wahrman, 'Percy's Prologue', p. 151.

[23] For the connexions between the political order, family relations and normative notions of femininity and masculinity in revolutionary France see Lynn Hunt, *Politics, Culture and Class in the French Revolution* (Berkeley & Los Angeles, 1984); Lynn Hunt, *The Family Romance of the French Revolution* (London, 1992) and Outram, *The Body and the French Revolution*. For a study of female participation during the revolutionary process, see Olwen H. Hufton, *Women and the Limits of Citizenship in the French Revolution* (Toronto, 1989). For a study on Marie Antoinette, see Elizabeth Colwill, 'Just another Citoyenne? Marie Antoinette on Trial, 1790-1793', *History Workshop Journal*, 28, (1989), pp. 63-87.

[24] Cohen, '"What the Women at All Times Would Laugh At"', p. 138.

and its length. Alexander, in comparison with his contemporary historians, who analysed women's condition as a benchmark in the civilising process, was not a scholar and achieved no recognition in his time. Hence, we still know very little about Alexander, whose life has mainly been researched by Jane Rendall[25].

The book was published in London in 1779. It is divided in two volumes and organised thematically rather than chronologically. Each chapter (or group of chapters) is focused on a particular subject, which is described chronologically, reviewing its variations throughout different times and places. In the first volume, Alexander included chapters such as 'A Short Sketch of the Antediluvian History of Women', 'Of Female Education', 'Of the Employments and Amusements of Women', 'Of the Treatment, Condition, Advantages, and Disadvantages of Women, in Savage and Civil Life', 'Of the Character and Conduct of Women', 'Of the Influence of Female Society' and 'Sketches of Ceremonies and Customs, for the most Part observed only by Women'. In the second volume, the chapters were 'Of Delicacy and Chastity', 'Of the various Opinions entertained by different Nations concerning Women', 'Of Dress, Ornament, and some other Methods, whereby Women endeavour to render themselves agreeable to the Men', 'Of Courtship', 'Of Matrimony', 'Of Celibacy' and 'Of Widowhood'. The book concluded with an appendix focused on Alexander's contemporary society: 'A short

[25] See, for instance, Jane Rendall, 'Alexander, Dr. William (1742-1788?)', in H. C. G. Matthew (ed.), *The New Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004) and Rendall, 'introduction' to William Alexander, (1779 ed.) *The History of Women. From the Earliest Antiquity to the Present Time* (Bristol, 1995), 2 vols.

view of some of the most material Laws and Customs, concerning the Women of Great Britain'. Therefore, it covers a wide array of themes: the condition of women in civil societies as compared with savage and primitive societies, female nature and its principal virtues, family life, courtship and female customs, dress and education. Although he directed his book to women, we have little proof of its success among female readers.

The *History of Women* is not solely devoted to relating the evolution of the female condition across time and space but also explores female nature and faculties, women's relation to progress and virtue, and their place in the articulation of private and public spheres. As such it can be considered a valuable example of the different discourses and ideas that came into play to define gender relations and identities in the eighteenth century. Its historical production can contribute to our understanding of the relation between historiographical transformations and the formation of gender identities. In addition, it stands as one of the first histories of women, in which women are the main theme of the historical enquiry in terms of their gender, and which departs from anthologies of famous women that characterised the early modern period. The historiographical interest of the book also lie in the variety of topics and material it included, which relates Alexander's efforts to contemporary historiographical developments closely connected with natural history and with the search for a science of man. Finally, the book reflected eighteenth century discussions about gender identities, women and their role in society, which ranged from proto-feminist vindications of equality to the re-

elaboration of old and new ideas into prescriptive definitions of femininity and women's role in society.

In order to explore the milieu in which the book was produced, two approaches have been used. On the one hand, a historical context of the book will be provided, outlining the situation of women in eighteenth century Britain and analysing the dialectics of national identity which strained as well as brought together the different parts that formed Great Britain. On the other hand, we will proceed to examine the intellectual background of the work, focusing primarily on the Scottish Enlightenment, as the *History of Women* can be rightfully considered a fine example of conjectural history, the historiographical paradigm favoured by the Scottish authors. Similarly, the Scottish scholarly revival provided Alexander's enquiry with ideas, inspiration and precedents. Although it should be recognised that the European context is also relevant for this research, a full analysis of the European debates and ideas regarding gender relations and identities is beyond the scope of this PhD thesis. Accordingly, Alexander's work will be considered in the light of the Scottish discussion of the role of women in society, forms of historical writing and elaboration of the discourse of sensibility.

It is the aim of the first chapter to delve into the lives of eighteenth century British women, focusing on their role within the family as mothers and wives while, at the same time, considering women's activities in the public sphere of work, sociability, economic activities, learning and politics. Due to processes of a different kind, women's situation in the final decades of the eighteenth century was unstable and changing, as a

result of the economic transformations resulting from the Industrial Revolution, the influence of political events such as the American War, the revolutionary ferment which preceded the French Revolution and the social changes stemming from the emergence of the middle classes and their bourgeois ethos. A holistic perspective has been sought in which ideas of femininity and feminine duties could be considered in the light of the manifold implications of gender, both of a private and a political nature.

The second chapter will provide an overview of the dynamics of identity which shaped the transformation of Britain into a more cohesive nation and influenced Scottish self-definitions and relations with the metropolis. These patriotic concerns helped to shape the ideological features of the Scottish Enlightenment, for its authors were deeply concerned with the maintenance and improvement of the community in front of a widening and changing world characterised by commercial growth and imperial expansion. At the same time, contemporary responses to Britain's emerging role as a commercial and imperial power fostered Scottish anxieties regarding the spread of riches and the inclusion of other peoples within the polity. Torn between the convenience of reaping the benefits offered to Scotland by the Union and fears concerning the negative effects of luxury and imperial might, the Scottish authors tried to negotiate the survival of the community in front of these moral dangers while, at the same time, profiting from the new sources of information which enlarged contact with non-European societies offered.

The third chapter will focus closely on questions related to women's role in society and the preservation of virtue. An overview of the origin, features and nature of the Scottish Enlightenment will be provided, followed by a discussion of the main discourses which shaped the articulation of femininity ideals by the Scottish authors, *i.e.* the defence of public and private virtue, sensibility, sociability and the civilising process. From the tension between enlightened concerns with progress, equality and improvement, and deep worries regarding the potential dangers which threatened to corrupt the polity, an ambivalent compromise was sought between conservatism and progressivism in which women figured both as agents of civilisation and as a threat to virtuous gender and social relations. These contradictions were reflected in Alexander's *History of Women*, as a result of the influence of the Scottish Enlightenment in the work. Thus, the articulation of Scottish ideas in the book will be examined, focusing on the tensions arising from his interpretation of the dual nature, prescriptive and progressive, of the Scottish Enlightenment which were heightened by Alexander's assumption of some of the current demands for women's equality.

The fourth chapter is centred on issues of methodology. The eighteenth century witnessed a boom of enquiries which discussed human nature, which delved into its qualities and properties using the methods and approaches of the natural sciences. Accordingly, attempts were made to establish a science of man which accounted for the evolution of man's faculties. Besides the influence of the scientific revolution, early modern thinkers, medicine, natural history, travellers' accounts and social circumstances helped to

ground this new intellectual approach in Scotland, where the enquiry on human nature was termed conjectural history. Focusing mainly on the evolution of man in society, conjectural history assumed the tenets of the Newtonian science, such as rationalism, secularism, deduction and induction, while devising methodological tools more peculiar to the quest for human nature such as the comparative method, the search for general causes and the four stages theory. However, and in spite of claims to impartiality, the conjectural project was not free from a normative bias which had social, political and gender implications. Alexander's *History of Women* clearly employed and partook of these assumptions and tenets which were used, in his case, to sustain and vindicate a conjectural project centred on women.

In the final chapter, we will pay attention to the discourse of sensibility, a many faceted ideology which infused eighteenth century literature, proto-feminist vindications and discourses on morality, medicine and gender. We will examine how the discourse of sensibility and its attendant quality, sympathy, permeated the Scottish Enlightenment, through an overview of the writings of several of its authors. We will consider the influence of this discourse in medicine and literature. Sensibility was deemed the source of many benefits yet it was not free from dangers which were acute for men and women alike. Men run the risk of falling into effeminacy while women, due to their heightened sensibility were prone to its excesses. As a comparison of the work of William Alexander with John Gregory's writings on conduct literature shows, the association of women with sensibility was used both to praise feminine influence and to prescribe a double

standard for men and women, refusing to allow women full access to the public sphere and equal rights. The discourse of sensibility was also used to endorse new forms of history reading, bringing history closer to the female reader. Even so, as the *History of Women* proves, women's finer sensibility could be used to condemn historical works as unsuitable for the refined female nature, thus restricting the scope of the intellectual activities of women.

1

Women in Eighteenth Century Britain

It is the aim of this chapter to be an introduction to the study that will follow on William Alexander's *History of Women* by offering an overview of the situation of women in eighteenth century Britain. Although most of this study will focus on the intellectual concerns that framed Alexander's project, it would be difficult to deny that Alexander was also impelled by the changing situation of the women of his time.

The move from tradition to modernity which characterised the female historical experience in the eighteenth century would in all probability have contributed to Alexander's reflection on women's historical self. The transformation of women's lives, propelled by the very processes that transformed Britain into a

first-rate commercial and imperial power, and into a society infused with politeness and civility, would have led Alexander to question women's roles, their share of power and the nature of gender relations. Alexander's effort to trace the evolution of women across time and space had the conditions of women in eighteenth century Britain as a kind of final act or conclusion. His overview of women's history seemed to place the situation of his contemporary British women as a desirable goal which, although not exempt from criticisms, would serve as a guide to the progress of womanhood that he desired.

When he set about writing his book, Alexander had clearly in mind a female readership which would be most probably of a genteel status. These women, endowed with the graces of politeness and civility, sharing the joys of the companionate marriage and having the material means to live a life at ease, would have been the main target of Alexander's book. Obliging towards their 'natural' role as wives and mothers yet enjoying the benefits of culture and the progress of manners, gentlewomen would also conform to the model of progress that the author proposed for womankind. Thus, this chapter would pay a particular attention to this section of the eighteenth century British female population.

VISIONS OF WOMANHOOD

Many of the stereotypes which defined womanhood in the eyes of eighteenth century British people were deep-rooted in time and stemmed from the Judeo-Christian heritage. The Bible abounded with negative portrayals of womanhood that defined

women as evil temptresses, source of corruption and a threat for men, such as Delilah and Jezebel. Eve, cursed by God, was the female figure that epitomised the wicked nature of women, and the one that would be systematically recalled throughout history in order to ground denunciations of the dangers posed by womanhood to men. The misogynistic tradition of the Old Testament would surface most significantly in the writings of Paul, who famously wrote 'Let a woman learn in silence with all submissiveness. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men; she is to keep silent', thus enshrining women's subjection as a pillar of the new-founded Church and endowing women's subordination with a strong religious sanction. Yet, the Christian tradition had also positive images, ranging from the praise of the good housewife contained in the Book of Proverbs to Mary Magdalene, who symbolised the possibility of redemption, and the Virgin Mary, who was Eve's opposite in her purity and innocence[1].

Popular culture similarly presented positive and negative visions of womanhood, being the latter more abundant and resilient. Women were defined by three basic characteristics which attested their evil nature and were already embodied in the figure of Eve. Women were insatiable and lustful creatures, they were prone to vanity, and keen to use their tongue as a weapon both alluring and intimidating. Thus women should be kept under

---

[1] Quoted in Olwen H. Hufton, *The Prospect before Her. A History of Women in Western Europe* (London, 1995), p. 29. See Hufton, *The Prospect before Her*, pp. 1-59 and Bonnie Smith, *Changing Lives. Women in European History since 1700* (Lexington, Mass. & Toronto, 1989), pp. 39-44.

control, their speech denied, their conceited nature curved by male authority and by the lack of economic rights, and their bodies possessed by their husbands and governed by the strict rules of decency. Women should be chaste, frugal, silent and obedient to avoid the basic dangers which threatened men's authority and claims to masculinity: lack of control of the household economy, adultery and female derision. Consequently, the witch and the whore emerged as powerful incarnations of the danger posed by women; in them, lust, independence from patriarchal authority and the power of speech were combined to endanger not only men but the whole community[2].

Women's bodies were further stigmatised in popular culture through a whole set of superstitions which stressed their impure and polluting nature. However, bodily functions peculiar to women also sustained positive images of womanhood and thus the life-generating process of childbirth was associated with the reproduction of the community and a closeness to nature which made women particularly fit to dispense remedies and the practice of traditional medicine[3].

The English liked to flatter themselves that their women enjoyed a peculiar degree of freedom, as compared with their continental counterparts. There was a proverb that summarised

---

[2] Anthony Fletcher, *Gender, Sex and Subordination in England, 1500-1800* (New Haven & London, 1995), pp. 3-29, Hufton, *The Prospect before Her*, pp. 1-59 and Smith, *Changing Lives*, pp. 39-44.

[3] Paul-Gabriel Boucé, 'Some Sexual Beliefs and Myths in Eighteenth Century Britain', in Paul-Gabriel Boucé (ed.), *Sexuality in Eighteenth Century Britain* (Totowa, New Jersey, 1982), pp. 28-46, Fletcher, *Gender, Sex and Subordination*, pp. 3-29, Hufton, *The Prospect before Her*, pp. 1-59 and Smith, *Changing Lives*, pp. 39-44.

this belief: 'if a bridge were built across the sea, all the ladies of the continent would come to take pattern with us'[4]. It is difficult to believe that it would be so, as British women had to face the same double standard which, with different argumentations, reigned throughout Europe. Masculine honour was decidedly sexual as far as it demanded sexual ownership of women and was eroded by any infringement of female chastity. However, probity in men was mainly defined by strength, religious devotion and the duties of hospitality. This code of honour was softened in the eighteenth century by the discourse of politeness which emphasised benevolence, good manners and self-command. By contrast, women's honour was in the eighteenth century, like in the early modern period, purely sexual. Women were to be first and foremost chaste; any breach of chastity constituted an irretrievable loss of dignity, honour and respect which no excellence in other virtues could undo. Women certainly felt oppressed by the rigours of this code although often played along the prevailing notions of female virtue in order to support different claims and erode a rival's reputation[5].

---

[4] Fletcher, *Gender, Sex and Subordination*, p. 4.

[5] Fletcher, *Gender, Sex and Subordination*, pp. 101-125, G. J. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth Century Britain* (Chicago, 1992), Hannah Barker and Elaine Chalus (eds.), *Gender in Eighteenth Century England. Roles, Representations and Responsibilities* (London & New York, 1997), Philip Carter, *Men and the Emergence of Polite Society, 1660-1800* (Harlow, England & New York, 2001), John Dwyer, *Virtuous Discourse: Sensibility and Community in Eighteenth Century Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1987), John Dwyer, *The Age of the Passions. An Interpretation of Adam Smith and the Scottish Enlightenment* (East Lothian, 1998), Hufton, *The Prospect before Her*, Susan Kingsley Kent, *Gender and Power in Britain, 1640-1990* (London & New York, 1999), Paul Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People. England, 1727-1783* (Oxford, 1989), Katherine Rogers, *Feminism in Eighteenth Century England* (Brighton, 1982), pp. 7-52, Smith, *Changing Lives*, Keith

These images of womanhood and gendered codes of honour were enforced at different social levels by conduct literature, ballads, chapbooks, charivari and rough music. Conduct literature enshrined the ideal of the chaste and submissive women in different writings while rough music tended to play along the patriarchal structure of society punishing the adulterous and gossiping women and deriding the cuckolded and abused husband[6].

COURTSHIP, MARRIAGE AND DOMESTIC LIFE

According to Richard Steele, 'all [a woman] has to do in this world is contained within the Duties of a Daughter, a Sister, a Wife and a Mother'[7]. As this quote highlights, women's role was to be fulfilled within matrimony. Matrimony was the ultimate objective for a woman, due to the constricting notions of femininity which

---

Thomas, 'The Double Standard', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, XX, (1959), pp. 195-216. On conduct literature, see Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction. A Political History of the Novel* (Oxford & New York, 1986), Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse, 'The Literature of Conduct, the Conduct of Literature and the Politics of Desire. An Introduction', in Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse (eds.), *The Ideology of Conduct* (London & New York, 1987), pp. 1-24, Vivien Jones, 'The Seductions of Conduct: Pleasure and Conduct Literature', in Roy Porter and Marie Mulvey Roberts (eds.), *Pleasure in the Eighteenth Century.* (London, 1996), pp. 108-132, Mary Catherine Moran, *From Rudeness to Refinement. Gender, Genre and Scottish Enlightenment* (unpublished PhD thesis, 1999), Kathryn Sutherland, 'Writings on Education and Conduct. Arguments for Female Improvement', in Vivien Jones (ed.), *Women and Literature in Britain* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 25-45.

[6] On rough music and charivari, see Fletcher, *Gender, Sex and Subordination*, pp. 101-125, John R. Gillis, *For Better for Worse. British Marriages, 1600 to the Present* (Oxford & New York, 1985) and E. P. Thompson, *Costumbres en común* (Barcelona, 1995), pp. 520-596.

[7] Quoted in Rogers, *Feminism in Eighteenth Century England*, p. 7.

demanded that women were always under a man's rule and to the economic and legal limitations imposed on them, which hindered them from making a living on their own. Even women from the wealthy sections of society were strongly pressed towards marriage, source of economic and political alliances. At all social levels, single women were considered a burden to their family.

The eighteenth century witnessed important changes in the way men and women married. Marriage patterns were modified within the broader demographic variations which defined what has been called the 'demographic revolution'. Hand in hand with the steady rise of population, the pre-industrial paradigm of late marriage and high levels of remarriage and celibacy dissolved. By mid-century, the average age of marriage for women was 26, falling to just about 23 by 1800. The average husband was 2 years older than the wife and they had a typical number of 6 children. Levels of illegitimacy increased, spurred by the growing urban population and proto-industrialisation, while celibacy decreased, as society came to bestow a higher value in marriage, both in economical and in cultural terms[8].

According to some authors, the eighteenth century witnessed the weakening of parental control and the emergence of romantic love as the main factor in marital unions, increasing its importance over economic calculation and family-driven concerns. This assumption has been maintained by Randolph Trumbach in *The*

[8] For the changes in eighteenth century marital patterns, see Gillis, *For Better, for Worse*, pp. 107-228. On the statistics regarding marriage, see also Hufton, *The Prospect before Her*, p. 132 and Anne Lawrence, *Women in England, 1500-1760* (London, 1994), pp. 3-13.

Rise of the Egalitarian Family and by Lawrence Stone and Edward Shorter. However, their view has come recently under attack by historians who have stressed the interaction between romantic and economic concerns and the ways by which parental control was upheld in a softer, informal way[9].

Although sanctioned by the Church, parental authority lessened the lower one descended the social scale. As Olwen Hufton has remarked, 'parental influence perhaps bore a direct relation to the amount of money they [parents] would put into a match and whether children were living at home'[10]. John R. Gillis has also emphasised the weakening of parental control as the wage economy spread. Waged work allowed men and women a degree of independence which they lacked in pre-industrial societies. Similarly, growing industrialisation went hand in hand with migrations to the areas where manufacture thrived and to the promising cities. Away from parents' presence and supervision, youngsters could give more weight to their own preferences. Gillis has also taken into account the influence of demographic factors. At a time when mortality, although decreasing, was still high, the bride or groom-to-be could find themselves with no-one to look up to when the moment of choosing the partner arrived[11].

---

[9] See Randolph Trumbach, *The Rise of the Egalitarian Family* (New York, 1978). For a different view see Hufton, *The Prospect before Her*, Susan Moller Okin, 'Patriarchy and Married Women's Property in England. Questions about Some Current Views', *Eighteenth Century Studies*, 17, (1983/84), pp. 121-139 and Amanda Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter. Women's Lives in Georgian England* (New Haven & London, 1998) among others.

[10] Hufton, *The Prospect before Her*, p. 119.

[11] Hufton, *The Prospect before Her*, pp. 99-133 and Gillis, *For Better, for Worse.*

Aristocratic marriages were guided mostly by political and economic interests, since the main objective of marriage was the reproduction of the line and buttressing the economic and political assets of the family. The heir of the family was particularly subjected to parental will as he was pressed into getting an economically advantageous match by the necessity of providing for the younger siblings. From the dowry of the bride-to-be, provision would be made for younger brothers and particularly for the dowries of younger sisters, whose chances to marry often depended on this much needed flood of money. Although somewhat softened by the rise of the ideal of companionate marriage, parental authority over the conjugal choices of the eldest sons would have probably remained strong throughout the century, as proved by the parental implication in the drawing up of settlements which detailed the uses and transmission of the family estate. By contrast, it seems that romantic concerns were more respected in the case of younger sons and daughters, to whom only a small part of the family fortune might be entailed. Women could gain some degree of independence thanks to property bequeathed to them by female relations. It is however difficult to assert, as Randolph Trumbach has, that romantic love was embraced disinterestedly by the aristocracy during the eighteenth century[12].

Similarly, at the other end of the social spectrum, among the rural population, economic concerns were a pressing issue.

---

[12] See Hufton, *The Prospect before Her*, pp. 99-133, Smith, *Changing Lives*, pp. 26-32, Trumbach, *The Rise of the Egalitarian Family*.

Prosperous property holders saw marriage as a means of sustaining their prosperity, by bringing together properties close to each other or potentially complementary. Further down the rural social scale, the sons and daughters of small property holders saw the establishment of a farm of their own as the main requisite and end of marriage. Thus, the rural youth was driven to bigger farms or to the cities in order to gain the economic resources that would enable them, once back in their towns, to scrap a living independently as small farmers.

In traditional societies parental control was checked by cultural, economic and social factors. Some historians, such as John R. Gillis, have argued that in the strongly homosocial world of traditional rural communities, parents surrendered much of their involvement in matchmaking to the unmarried segment of the community, even to the point of allowing individual choice as long as the rest of the young approved. Youngsters who went away in order to learn the skills of farming or to save the money necessary to settle as small holders were often far away from parental presence and thus, not pliable to their parents' demands. In their case, the authority of the head of the household for whom they worked had also to be taken into account. By contrast, for those not impelled to move away, their choices were restricted by the limited geographical space where they daily interacted, which might have helped parents to influence their choice[13].

---

[13] Gillis, *For Better, for Worse*, pp. 9-106, Hufton, *The Prospect before Her*, pp. 99-133 and Smith, *Changing Lives*, pp. 19-26.

Prospect of sufficiency, a good dowry and sound financial prospects, should not be underestimated as elements conditioning the choice of a partner. Remaining diaries from the period bear proof to this, although they also acknowledge that physical attraction and personal compatibility were taken into account when considering this important decision. However, the standards of beauty were different from today's. In a world where lack of nutrients and hygiene were the norm rather than the exception, 'the man or woman who was not pock-marked and suffering from vitamin deficiency diseases, congenital defects or malformations counted as handsome'[14].

Among the genteel section of the society, parental control, economic concerns and romantic attachment were subjected to a complex bargain in which subtle factors weighed more than blunt authority. Certainly, men and women sought to combine advantageously these three elements as marital contentment was thought to be grounded on economic soundness, family advantage and mutual friendship. Accordingly, we should not overestimate the importance given to love. As exemplified by Jane Austen's novels and stated by Vickery, 'mutual affection which crowned an advantageous match was a welcome blessing, but immoderate passion, leading couples to disregard other criteria was thought near-insane'[15].

---

[14] Hufton, *The Prospect before Her*, p. 126.

[15] Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter*, p. 41. See also Jane Austen, (1811) *Sense and Sensibility* (London, 1974), Jane Austen, (1816) *Emma* (London, 1983), Jane Austen, (1814) *Mansfield Park* (London, 1973), Jane Austen, (1818) *Northanger Abbey* (Hardmonthsworth, 1973) and Jane Austen, (1813) *Pride and Prejudice* (London, 1987).

Once again, we should not disregard the romantic appeal of wealth and status nor fail to recognise the indirect means by which parental control was upheld. The influence of the discourse of politeness, which bestowed a high value in domesticity, and the culture of sensibility, which emphasised the benefits of benevolence and feeling, encouraged parents to shy away from the employment of harsh authority. They relied instead on a sound female education which enforced notions of propriety and compliance, stressing the convenience of seeking parental advice and of social and economic soundness in their choices. Girls were also restricted by the rules of a polite sociability which discriminated against acquaintances not endowed with the socio-economic requirements and which was carefully planned and supervised by trustworthy female relations and close friends. Even so, there were occasions in which daughters' preferences did not suit family aspirations. In these cases, girls would rather turn to loving entreaties to mould and soften opposition. In tune with the sensitive mood of the period and with the requirements of gender roles, a display of weakness, vulnerability and submission through tears, sighs and melancholic looks was preferred to open defiance[16].

Similar controls were imposed on the daughters of the upper echelons of the middling sort. However, at its lower levels and due to the requirements of a family economy in which female contribution was essential, the middle classes allowed a wider circle

[16] See Hufton, *The Prospect before Her*, pp. 99-133 and Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter*, pp. 39-86.

of acquaintances from which an ill-advised match could arise. Even so, intermarriage prevailed among the middle classes[17].

Courtship has been considered a period enjoyed by women. For a brief time, the balance of power between the sexes was reversed. Men pleaded their love and bestowed their attentions upon women, who had the power to reject, consent or encourage these proofs of endearment. For men, courtship was also attractive. There was a sense of adventurous quest to it, in which they should surmount continuous difficulties, not at all incompatible with notions of manhood. Thus, youngsters in traditional societies engaged in demonstrations of strength and physical dexterity which constituted a challenge and a show of masculinity[18].

As a general rule, women should not take the lead during courtship. They were advised by conduct literature to adopt a passive role, to act coyly and discreetly, being perfectly aware of the subtleties and the potential risks romance entailed yet appearing decorously detached and insensitive to the ardours of passion. However, this prescriptive code obviously allowed variations, according to class, custom and individual personality.

The more traditional communities of rural Britain offered opportunities for the casual intermingling between the sexes in

---

[17] Hufton, *The Prospect before Her*, pp. 99-133 and Margaret Hunt, *The Middling Sort. Commerce, Gender and Family in England, 1680-1780* (Berkeley, Los Angeles & London, 1996).

[18] Gillis, *For Better, for Worse*, pp. 11-54 and Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter*, pp. 39-86.

special occasions and in ways which seemed highly indecorous to the polite classes. During harvest festivals, on the festivities of Valentine's, May and Midsummer's Day and in Easter Monday and Tuesday the young singed and danced together, joined in games which involved physical contact and exchanged small gifts and kisses. These practices were carefully supervised by the community, which prevented intimacy and fostered casual intermingling and change of partners. Thus, the couple had to wait until the engagement was made public to enjoy privacy and even sexual intercourse, since promise of marriage was considered nearly as binding as marriage itself[19].

These customs were eroded by the proletarisation of the rural population, as a consequence of the agricultural revolution, the spread of manufactures and wage work, and the unremitting migrations to the cities. There, lacking the strict surveillance of the community and the gender division of work and leisure characteristic of traditional societies, young people had wider opportunities for coming together. Running errands and working together in workshops and domestic service, the young interacted on a daily basis. Taverns, theatres, gardens and coffee houses were places of mixed sociability while fairs, festivals and the Easter and Christmas festivities drew the youth from both sexes together. As a result, the homosocial patterns of traditional societies were eroded by a precocious heterosexuality, marriage was often

[19] Gillis, *For Better, for Worse*, pp. 11-54 and Hufton, *The Prospect before Her*, pp. 99-133.

delayed, and the couples lived together and engaged in sexual relationships after promise of marriage was given[20].

None of this informality existed among genteel families. The mixing of the sexes was carefully supervised in polite gatherings such as assemblies, balls, theatres, and private dinners, to which only the select circle of the affluent and well-bred were allowed. Mothers, aunts and other female relatives built up social networks and planned social events from which an advantageous union could be initiated. As the century progressed, the rise in popularity of the London season and of spa towns and resorts enlarged the opportunities for both sexes to meet and for the families to foster convenient matches. Once an emotional attachment was forged, lovers exchanged letters and gifts and strived to meet each other less publicly until consent was given and engagement made public. Among these families, the engagement period involved careful negotiation; family and friends had to be reconciled to the match and financial matters had to be settled to both parties' content. Contrary to rural tradition by which, though binding if pregnancy arose, betrothal was considered a period of trial which could be dissolved without damage to the girl's character, in the genteel segment of society engagements which collapsed at the settlement stage tainted seriously a woman's reputation[21].

In Britain, traditional weddings were public ceremonies in which the whole community was assembled to celebrate and be

---

[20] Gillis, *For Better, for Worse*, pp. 161-189 and Hufton, *The Prospect before Her*, pp. 99-133.

[21] Hufton, *The Prospect before Her*, pp. 99-133 and Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter*, pp. 39-86.

reconciled to the union. The couple yielded much of its leading role to their peers who pursued them, played different tricks on them and made their presence felt throughout the several stages of the wedding day. Friends paraded the couple to the church, the wedding party seized the bride's garter, they laid ropes and barriers in the way of the married pair and sang rough music, teasing and deriding both the couple and the marital institution. Although for the most part the role of the bride was to be passive, honouring the authority of the husband-to-be and promising obedience, these 'big weddings' also allowed a significant and empowering role of the bride. She presided over the feast and other wedding rituals. The presents in money and kind were put into her hands. She was paraded with the furniture, linen and other additions to the new dwelling, the material proof of her contribution to the marriage[22].

During the eighteenth century the 'big wedding' tradition was steadily eroded. The middle classes, joined by the aristocracy in their support for the ideology of domesticity and its emphasis on intimacy, disapproved of the public nature and rowdy rituals of the 'big wedding'. The urban working classes had never shared this tradition, lacking the deep involvement in community life from which the 'big wedding' stemmed. The social polarisation of the countryside threatened the ritual in its very cultural milieu. Well-off farmers imitated the lifestyle of the middle classes while rejecting the paternalistic practices that underlay the big wedding. They sought to differentiate themselves from the rest of the community,

---

[22] Gillis, *For Better, for Worse*, pp. 55-83 and Hufton, *The Prospect before Her*, pp. 134-172.

establishing boundaries of social respectability and rejecting to contribute discriminately to any marriage within the community. They strongly opposed the marriages of the impoverished segment of the community, whose unions were seen as a potential burden since the resulting pregnancies might increase the number of people dependent on local poor relief. Among the lowest sections of the population, however, the tradition of the 'big wedding' was refashioned into the so called 'beggar weddings' which had as their main aim to help the couple to scrap a living with the few proceeds that could be collected from the guests[23].

Clandestine marriages (without banns or licenses) and free unions were common in the cities, which thus registered higher rates of illegitimacy[24]. Lacking the pressure of the community and clerical censure, couples with a frail financial support would opt for cohabitation rather than endlessly postpone marriage until they achieved a sounder economic position, which was also easier to procure as a couple. Allowing easy separations, both free unions and self-marriage (which only required consent in presence of witnesses) suited the poorer sections of the population and the volatile communities of migrant workers, who often depended on shifting and unstable working conditions. Premarital sex was

---

[23] Anna Clark, *The Struggle for the Breeches: Gender and the Making of the British Working Class* (Berkeley & Los Angeles, 1995), pp. 42-62, Gillis, *For Better, for Worse*, pp. 107-228 and Hufton, *The Prospect before Her*, pp. 134-172.

[24] Marriages were preceded by banns which made the union public to all the community. The aristocracy, keen on more private ways, purchased licenses which stated the public nature of the ceremony without the hassle of the public announcement which the banns often entailed. Licenses were expensive thus being virtually restricted to the upper echelons of society. However, many couples went to the cities to purchase licenses at cheap prices, sold by impoverished priests. See Gillis, *For Better, for Worse*, pp. 9-228.

common in the cities where traditional practices (the binding nature of promises of marriage) and some degree of libertinism informed plebeian culture. In addition, as Anna Clark has emphasised, proto-industrial workers gave less importance to female chastity than to hard work and wage earning potential. Growing concerns about poor relief and charity assistance drew impoverished couples from the countryside to the cities where they could get married without opposition.

At the upper end of the social scale, among the genteel and the middle classes, weddings were mostly a private family affair. Guests were limited to family and close friends. The couple was respected and revered, none of its dignity and prominence challenged by an uproarious crowd. The couple arrived to the church in a closed carriage, the feast took place discreetly and later the couple could travel alone for a few days, as honeymoon was starting to be fashionable among the wealthiest. Weddings of this kind acted mainly as a means of emphasising class difference rather than buttressing the cohesion of the community, as big weddings did. Aware of their social implications, 'private weddings' were imitated by all those wishing to associate themselves with a higher social status[25].

By mid-century, the Hardwicke's Marriage Act (1753) introduced major changes in the legal framework which regulated marriage. Its main aim was to uphold parental authority and prevent clandestine marriages, as demanded by the aristocracy and

[25] Gillis, *For Better, for Worse*, pp. 135-160.

the middle classes. From this moment on, the only valid form of marriage was one conducted in a church by the ordained clergy, preceded by banns or requiring a license, and recorded in the parish register. Accordingly, this Act enshrined the social double standard that allowed the wealthy the privacy of a marriage license while the poor were to make public their intentions through public banns. Promises of marriage and oral spousals ceased to have any force and the consent of parents or guardians was required for anyone under twenty one. Church courts were excluded from marital litigation, for it was thought that the Church showed excessive leniency towards irregularities such as betrothal rights or clandestine marriages. In addition, this Act made marriage more difficult for the poorer sections of the population, as it demanded a residence of at least three weeks in the parish were the marriage was to be conducted. The Act increased significantly the costs of marriage and thus had the unintended effect of fostering free unions and cohabitation[26].

Scotland remained unaffected from this tightening of the marital practices. Both regular marriages (with banns or license and conducted by a priest) and irregular marriages (involving a public commitment but without banns or a priest) had legal validity, although irregular marriages were subject to some penalties. Thus, many couples eloped to Scotland where they could made legal

[26] Clark, *The Struggle for the Breeches*, pp. 42-62, Gillis, *For Better, for Worse*, pp. 135-160 and Lawrence, *Women in England*, p. 41.

their unions without the expenses and requirements demanded by the Hardwicke's Act[27].

After marriage, women's legal self was subsumed under her husband's. In Blackstone's words, 'by marriage, the very being or legal existence of a woman is suspended, or at least it is incorporated or consolidated into that of the husband, under whose wing, protection and cover she performs everything, and she is therefore called in our law a *feme covert*'[28]. As a result, women could not sue, make a contract or have full control of their property. Anything a woman had or inherited could be spent as her husband chose. In English common law, wives could hold no real property except through their husbands; nor could they alter or dispose of property without their husband's consent, even if it was their own inheritance. Women could not make wills or appoint executors without their husband's agreement. All their personal goods at the time of their marriage or acquired subsequently became her husband's. In addition, a husband controlled his wife's children, her residence and her way of life. Even after his death, the widow had no rights over their children unless he had made her their guardian[29].

Only widows and single women could own land. However, all women could take on tenancies, although with some restrictions. Many tenancies were held by right of widowhood. Thus, by right

---

[27] Norah Smith, 'Sexual Mores and Attitudes in Enlightened Scotland', in Paul-Gabriel Boucé (ed.), *Sexuality in Eighteenth Century Britain* (Totowa, New Jersey, 1982), pp. 47-73.

[28] Quoted in Smith, *Changing Lives*, p. 21

[29] Lawrence, *Women in England*, pp. 227-230 and Rogers, *Feminism in Eighteenth Century England*, pp. 7-52.

of their husbands having been the previous tenants or the couple having held a joint tenancy, some women kept the rights over the tenancy after their husbands had passed away. Other women held land by surrender from a father or a brother[30].

It was not unusual that some women, generally from the aristocracy but also from the middling sort, were endowed with a 'separate estate', *i.e.* cash or real property which was granted to women for their separate use by a prenuptial settlement or agreement, or by a relative's will. From the seventeenth century onwards, aristocratic and gentry settlements increasingly established portions and jointures for women. A portion was a sum a woman received from her family and took with her into marriage, while a jointure stated an annual provision to be paid to the woman after the husband's death[31].

The importance which these provisions acquired in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries has been considered by some authors as a proof of a tendency towards egalitarism and of a greater leniency among aristocratic families regarding women's exclusion from property rights. However, other authors, such as Susan Moller Okin have argued against this view. The increasing presence of portions and jointures in marriage settlements might be the result of a greater demand of husbands among the aristocracy during these centuries. In addition, it is difficult to tell how much control the wife actually had over the separate estate and portions, considering the weight of masculine authority within

---

[30] Lawrence, *Women in England*, p. 229.

[31] Trumbach, *The Rise of the Egalitarian Family*, Hunt, *The Middling Sort*, pp. 157-162 and Moller Okin, 'Patriarchy and Married Women's Property'.

marriage. These assets could hardly be disposed of at a woman's will. They were sometimes considered to be part of her family of origin, and expected to return to it, often through the woman's will. Usually, portions and separate estate were used to provide for younger sons and daughters, granting them some share of the family wealth. Besides, the common law did not consider separate estates exempt from the general rule which upheld the rights of the husband who, moreover, was usually the trustee. It was common in the period to lessen the importance of the separate estate by identifying it with 'pin money' (an allowance settled on a woman at marriage for her necessities which was mainly resorted to by the very rich). Through this rhetorical device which identified the separate estate with the wealthiest, the issue of women's much needed economic assets was trivialised by implying that all that was at stake was women's capacity to indulge in fashion and vanity[32].

The law gave the husband the right to inflict what was called 'moderate correction' on his wife. There were some guidelines such as that the violence should not draw blood and that if a stick was used, it should be no thicker that a man's thumb. Women resorted to community support in order to curb a husband's violent tendencies. By cultivating the sympathy of neighbours and friends and appealing to family ties, they hoped to enlist their support and mediation when marital violence exploded. Yet, it was not always the case; servants often refused to testify in support of the wife, family pressure could serve as a spur to the husband's

---

[32] Hunt, *The Middling Sort*, pp. 157-162, Moller Okin, 'Patriarchy and Married Women's Property'. For a different view, see Trumbach, *The Rise of the Egalitarian Family*.

abusive tendencies and there were cases in which, although the family was aware of repeated beatings, they did nothing to put a stop to it[33].

Abused women sometimes had the courage to seek legal redress. They generally backed their claims by employing the patriarchal discourse of gender hierarchies. They declared the affection they felt for their husbands, recounted their merits according to the patriarchal definitions of wifely duty, and protested their obedience and acceptance of male supremacy. In turn, husbands justified their violence as a deserved reprimand for severe faults such as drinking, verbal defiance, refusal of sexual demands or extravagant spending[34].

Women were rarely awarded the legal support they sought at court. Judges were imbued with the patriarchal ideology and the double standard which enshrined male authority and thus demanded from a woman an unflawed character as proof of innocence. To be abused, beaten, raped or impregnated was automatically considered evidence of lack of virtue, and enough to dismiss women's claims. As Fletched has accurately affirmed, 'wife-beating persisted because of its social acceptability in male circles. The supposed disciplinary function of the practice was never anything more than a fiction, a piece of hypocrisy that reflected the direct and unequivocal power of husbands'[35].

---

33 Fletcher, *Gender, Sex and Subordination*, pp. 192-203 and Thomas, 'The Double Standard'.

34 Fletcher, *Gender, Sex and Subordination*, pp. 192-203.

35 Fletcher, *Gender, Sex and Subordination*, p. 196. On the biased nature of the courts of justice, see Hufton, *The Prospect before Her*, pp. 262-285.

There were situations which were more likely to engender violence. Among the middle classes it was not uncommon that the wife's refusal to allow the husband control of her separate money was followed by some sort of aggression. Similarly, there were cases in which abuse was provoked by the wife's relatives' denial of economic support, credit or business cooperation. It was then hoped that the family would comply in order to stop mistreatment. Among the lower orders, the pressures of poverty and unemployment generated arguments and brutality. In her study on the culture and gender relations of proto-industrial workers, Clark has identified an increasing rate of marital strife and violence with what she has called 'the struggle for the breeches', or the tensions arising from competition with women for work and from women's access to wage work, which encouraged a sense of autonomy from male rule. It is difficult to ascertain the levels of family violence among the respectable classes, as they were reluctant to go to court. However, the surviving diaries of gentry women bear witness that male brutality was not restricted to the lower orders of society[36].

In the eighteenth century, the discourse of sensibility and the culture of politeness sought to erode the social acceptance of wife-beating. The stress on feeling, benevolence, companionate marriage and soft manners, on the one hand, and, on the other, the value given to women as mothers, companions and refined beings, penetrated the upper echelons of society which rejected wife-

[36] See Clark, *The Struggle for the Breeches*, Fletcher, *Gender, Sex and Subordination*, pp. 192-203, Hunt, *The Middling Sort* and Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter*.

beating as a barbarous practice. At the same time, family violence was rhetorically displaced to the lower classes, as wife-beating became progressively a mark of the inferiority and animality of the poor. At the lower levels of society changes in the perception of wife-battering also took place. While charivaris and rough music in the seventeenth century focused on the cuckolded husband and punished the bickering woman, in the eighteenth century rough music was mainly directed against wife-beaters. Even so, and in spite that much of what actually happened is inaccessible to the historian, there are good reasons to think that wife-beating persisted in England[37].

However badly damaged conjugality was, the law offered little assistance to wronged wives and wrangling couples. Marriage was to last till the death of one of the partners and, thus, divorce, annulment and separation were mostly difficult to obtain, expensive, prejudiced against women and restricted to the upper classes.

Annulments were difficult to obtain. In England, only if it was discovered that the marriage had taken place within unacceptable degrees of consanguinity, it was dissolved and remarriage allowed. In Scotland, it was also possible to obtain an annulment on the grounds of male impotency, for the Calvinist

---

[37] Fletcher, *Gender, Sex and Subordination*. On sensibility and politeness, see Dwyer, *Virtuous Discourse* and Barker-Benfield, *Culture of Sensibility*; see also chapter 5 of this PhD thesis. On charivari and rough music, see Gillis, *For Better, for Worse* and Thompson, *Costumbres en Común*, pp. 520-596.

tradition argued that the bearing of children was the main means by which women could reach salvation[38].

Divorce by Act of Parliament was a rare, expensive and mainly aristocratic affair. Between 1670 and 1857 there were only 325 divorces in England, all but four of which obtained by men. Men were allowed to divorce with right to remarry on the grounds of female adultery. However, for women there was no such possibility. In order to obtain a divorce, women had to prove adultery as well as life-threatening cruelty. By contrast, in Scotland, divorce for adultery committed by either partner could be obtained since 1569 and a statute of 1573 recognised malicious desertions, if continued for four years, as another ground for divorce[39].

The offence of 'criminal conversation' came into being in the closing decades of the seventeenth century, being resorted to mainly by the aristocracy. Here, a civil action could be brought by a husband charging another man with adulterous intimacy with his wife and claiming monetary compensation. Successful cases were inevitably followed by divorce since the fact of adultery had been proven. Their number should not be exaggerated; before 1760 there were less than twenty per decade, reaching their peak in the 1790's with a number of about 70 per decade. 'Criminal conversation' cases obtained widespread publicity and were followed eagerly by the people that, interested in the airing of the

---

[38] Hufton, *The Prospect before Her*, pp. 251-298, Smith, 'Sexual Mores and Attitudes', p. 49-50 and Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter*, p. 73.

[39] Hufton, *The Prospect before Her*, pp. 251-298, Smith, 'Sexual Mores and Attitudes', p. 50, Thomas, 'The Double Standard', Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter*, p. 73.

private lives of their social superiors, went to the courts to see the main actors in the drama, and read avidly the details in pamphlets and booklets, which evolved into a literary genre of its own[40].

A double standard underlay these criminal actions. The 'crim con' cases emphasised the subordinate position of women with respect to their husbands. A breach of wifely chastity was to be repaid in money, thus highlighting that women and their sexuality were considered the husband's property. Besides, in these proceedings, it was female sexual conduct which was on trial but not male's, as men's adultery could not initiate such actions[41].

While among the upper classes the right to divorce was reinforced through 'criminal conversation' cases, at the lower end of the social scale, there was a decriminalisation of sexual relations outside marriage. Following the Hardwicke's Marriage Act, ecclesiastical courts lost much of their role in policing conjugal morality and regulating marriage. Besides, the local justices of peace lost interest in adultery or immorality unless a bastard child threatened to be a burden to parish poor relief. Accordingly, a social double standard should be added up to the gendered double standard which characterised 'criminal conversation' actions. While the poor were increasingly excluded from divorce, the wealthy increased their possibilities of obtaining the dissolution of their marriages[42].

---

[40] Hufton, *The Prospect before Her*, pp. 251-298.

[41] Hufton, *The Prospect before Her*, pp. 251-298.

[42] Hufton, *The Prospect before Her*, pp. 251-298.

'Informal divorce' was more common than legal divorce. There existed numerous private deeds of separation by which a couple dissolved as a matter of fact their marriage. A married couple whose marriage had broken down, having sufficient resources to live separately, could arrive at an amicable private settlement which permitted separation but not remarriage. The husband had to be persuaded to give the wife enough to live on, and agreements had to be reached regarding the control of the children and of the assets brought to the marriage by the wife. Amicable separations did not forfeit the authority of the husband over the wife or lacked the inequality which characterised legal divorce, as proved by the case of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu. Edward Wortley Montagu accepted separation from his wife and allotted her an income to live on but apparently on the condition that she stayed away from England, which meant never seeing her daughter and grandchildren. Montagu felt she had to ask his consent in disposing of a 200 pounds legacy she had received and could only hope he could permit her to give her jewels to her daughter[43].

Separation could also be forced upon one of the partners. Some women filed in the courts for a separate maintenance alleging barbarous behaviour such as life-threatening brutality, keeping prostitutes or adulteresses, or denial of sufficient victuals and necessities. In turn, when faced with separation suits, husbands commonly intimidated their wives by threatening to

---

[43] Hufton, *The Prospect before Her*, p. 261, Rogers, *Feminism in Eighteenth Century England*, pp. 7-52.

commit them to a house of correction or to the madhouse. The husband's rights over his wife were so absolute that, at least until the nineteenth century, he was considered by courts to be entitled to imprison her in order to prevent her from leaving him. In addition, the wife's financial support was at issue only in cases in which the husband agreed to the separation or was considered to have done something to justify it. Otherwise, he was no longer liable for any debts she contracted, even for necessities. Yet, she was still a *feme covert* and incapable of making contracts or incurring debts on her own behalf[44].

Whatever the way, divorced or separated women were always tainted by the stigma of disreputability. Divorce and separation did not fail to bring public scrutiny upon one's marriage and, given the double standard that reigned in the period, women's behaviour and character were likely to be viewed in a negative light. Separation often meant social suicide, since a separated woman would be automatically rejected within the circles of respectable sociability. Social isolation could be assuaged by family support, although there were no guarantees that the family would be sympathetic to her plight[45].

At the very bottom end of the social scale, there existed the practice of wife sale. In some public place, such as a market or a tavern, a man (whom the wife would provably have known) would pay a small sum to the husband thus symbolically gaining the

---

[44] Moller Okin, 'Patriarchy and Married Women's Property', Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter*, p. 81.

[45] Moller Okin, 'Patriarchy and Married Women's Property', Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter*, pp. 39-86.

husband's rights over the wife and dissolving the marriage. Such agreements did not have the approbation of the Church or the state and, given the scarce documentation that remains on these bargains, it is difficult to establish the implications it had for each of the members of the couple. Referring to this practice in the nineteenth century, some authors have argued that it was considered offensive by women, who went into the market or tavern tied by a leash and following the husband[46].

Despite all the quarrelling and wretchedness which married life could engender, surviving sources of a private nature, such as diaries, wills and letters, also bear witness to domestic happiness and marital contentment. These testimonies of marital life vary from respectful affection and dignified love to close intimacy and passionate tenderness. Diaries abound with references to everyday conviviality, worries about frail health and the risks pregnancy entailed, and deep sorrow over the death of a much-loved wife or husband. They often speak of trust, mutual support and domestic joy. Wills included specific arrangements for the widow's comfort and well-being. In their correspondence, couples addressed each other as 'my beloved wife' or 'my loving husband'. We even find references to concerns about giving women their rightful pleasure in sexual intercourse and hints of a fulfilling sexuality[47].

---

[46] See Clark, *The Struggle for the Breeches*, pp. 84-90, Gillis, *For Better, for Worse*, pp. 211-219, Hufton, *The Prospect before Her*, pp. 251-298 and Thompson, *Costumbres en Común*.

[47] See Fletcher, *Gender, Sex and Subordination*, pp. 154-172 and Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter*, pp. 39-86.

The restrictive ideology of sermons, conduct books and prescribed gender roles had a limited application in practice, giving way to different variants between conjugal felicity and irretrievable wretchedness. Patriarchal discourses of male authority and wifely meekness contrasted with the more permissive ways in which women and men conducted their married lives. The submissive and passive role advised for women was in open contradiction with the notion that, at all levels of society, family order depended on a partnership between husband and wife, and on the wife's active management of the household.

From the peasant cottage to the aristocratic manor, economic success depended largely on cooperation between the couple, as established by a division of duties by which husband and wife had a joint responsibility for family prosperity. Rural women were in charge of dairying, processing food and market selling. Middle class women run errands, kept the accounts and helped in the shops. Gentlewomen were in charge of the smooth running of the household, overseeing servants, suppliers and provision. Aristocratic women, whose husbands were involved in high politics and thus often far away from home, helped in their political pursuits and dealt with legal processes and with the tenants. Obviously, at all social levels, childrearing and domestic chores were female obligations, which only a few could partially delegate to servants. To fulfil these duties properly, all these women had to be competent and have a strong personality. In female daily routine, for the most part, there was little room for backwardness and lifelessness. Accordingly, it was not uncommon that a wife was esteemed particularly for her proficiency and there

were husbands who tolerated a wife's failure to be submissive on account of her organising abilities. Even so, it was always men's prerogative to chide women for incompetence and, by exerting their authority, put women back in their place[48].

Given the economic drawbacks, the threat of losing the children, the incapacity to live independently by the work of their hands and the difficulties which separation and divorce entailed, 'a high tolerance level of marital violence and sexual infidelity was demanded of the pious Christian wife'[49]. In a similar vein, referring to the lives of English gentlewomen in the eighteenth century, Vickery has remarked that 'whether a woman was content in marriage turned in large measure on their ability to resign herself to the traditional roles, responsibilities and relationship of husband and wife'[50]. Even in this privileged milieu, women generally accepted their fate, enduring a marital life which could be conductive to bitterness rather than to domestic happiness. Following current patriarchal definitions of gender roles, women expressed their pleasure in doing their duty as its was expected from them, though in ways not always exempt from resentment: 'there is certainly a secret pleasure in doing what we ought, tho' perhaps one do not meet with a suitable return' wrote Ann Pellet in the 1770's. Others sought mystical consolations in their religious faith and viewed their doing right in the face of mistreatment as a kind of matrimonial martyrdom. Nevertheless, deferential attitudes

---

[48] Fletcher, *Gender, Sex and Subordination*, pp. 173-191.

[49] Hufton, *The Prospect before Her*, p. 260.

[50] Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter*, p. 83.

were not always an expression of a submissive spirit and thus, in their private correspondence, women playfully mocked their husbands and showed their contempt for them[51].

In order to preserve a conjugal felicity ruled by patriarchal meekness, women were advised to use gentle arts in order to prevail over their husbands through indirect means. Female influence was much publicised over the period and considered as the panacea which would turn women's formal subordination into an advantageous supremacy over their husbands. Rousseau, one of its most influential advocates, defined this 'soft power' as follows: 'women's empire is an empire of gentleness, skill and obligingness; her orders are caresses, her threats are tears. She ought to reign in the home as a minister does in a state – by getting herself commanded to do what she wants to do'. Besides prescribing the appropriate behaviour of an ideal wife, such advice identified a fiction believed by many women. As Lady Mary Wortley Montagu bitterly lamented, 'I am glad [women] can find in the imaginary Empire of Beauty a consolation for being excluded every part of Government in the State'. In spite of Rousseau's assurances, the success of these artful tactics was far from guaranteed. As we have seen, women often found to their cost that influence was no substitute for power[52].

---

[51] Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter*, p. 83.

[52] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, (1762) *Émile* (London, 2000), p. 408. Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter*, p. 85.

SEXUALITY

The advocates of female 'soft power' were covertly encouraging women to use their sexual ascendancy over men as a means of marital bargaining. In eighteenth century mentalities, women and sex were thus deeply linked, to the point that women were referred in contemporary literature – in Alexander's work too – as 'the Sex'. Sexuality was embedded in the core of contemporary definitions of femininity. As female virtue was inextricably linked to sexuality and sexual intercourse restricted to marriage, women should be carefully moulded according to a prescriptive femininity in order that their sexual appetites were restrained while single. Women who yielded their favours before marriage were considered undone; their virtue was forever lost, they were banished from respectable sociability and their possibilities for marriage were severely hindered – with all the economic drawbacks which this entailed. As we have seen, the control of women's sexuality was among the defining traits of masculinity and was one of the underlying bases of marriage as established in eighteenth century Britain. Female chastity was enforced by law, custom, gender ideologies and religion. Masculine honour and mastery over women were at stake as well as more tangible issues such as the transmission of the family property along the male legitimate line[53].

---

[53] On a summary of the sexual nature of femininity as conceptualised in the enlightenment thought, see Rousseau, *Émile*. For literary representations of the value given to chastity and the need to preserve it at any cost, see Samuel Richardson, *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded* (London, 2003).

Current assumptions on female sexuality were organised around conflicting notions. On the one hand, the discourses of politeness and sensibility defined the ideal wife as a friend and companion while placing motherhood at the core of a fulfilled femininity. As a result, women's sexual needs were disregarded in favour of an idealised image of maternity which was considered the main blessing resulting from marriage and sexual intercourse. As Ruth Perry has put it, 'as fiction began to valorize maternal feeling, women's psychological needs increasingly were seen as focused in the desire for a child, and other sex urges were interpreted as perverse'[54]. Far from being an entirely new ideological turn, this 'desexualisation' of women was in consonance with the vocabulary of chivalry as well as with prevailing notions which demanded from women an utmost control of their sexual urges by exalting women's natural purity, chastity and modesty, thus suggesting that women's self was somehow less sexual than men's.

On the other hand, traditional assumptions, rooted in images which can be traced to the biblical figure of Eve, depicted women as lustful beings whose deeply sexual nature was both insatiable and a threat for men. Although both the vocabulary of politeness and enlightened ideas went against this notion, it survived in the popular imagination and in contemporary representations of working class, savage and exotic women. While the enlightened discourse of civility 'purified' respectable women from the stain of

---

[54] Ruth Perry, 'Colonizing the Breast: Sexuality and Maternity in Eighteenth Century England', in John C. Fout (ed.), *Forbidden History. The State, Society and the Regulation of Sexuality in Modern Europe* (Chicago & London, 1992), pp. 107-137.

an unbridled sexuality, it was at the cost of displacing this trait to the female images of the racial and socio-economic 'other'[55].

Women were excluded from enlightened attitudes towards sexuality which conceived sex as something natural and as an important part of the economy of nature. The enlightened thought promoted a positive image of sexuality, in tune with its belief that man's nature should be fulfilled and happiness pursued. Enlightened authors argued that the passions were desirable and should be approved. Sex was regarded as one of these passions which belonged to man's nature and, accordingly, was recommended as part of a healthy lifestyle. The writings of the Scottish conjectural historians denoted a particular interest in the workings of human sexuality. Following Hume, they considered sexual desire the main drive towards the family, and thus, the basis of society. However, they thought that the animal sexuality of the primitive men should be polished, giving way to monogamous marriage, in order to secure a sound basis for the family as the main pillar of society. In more civilised times, sexuality was regarded an important component of the amorous affection and of the relation between the sexes. They sought to inhibit the sexual

[55] On the interrelation of race, gender, sex and empire, see Joanna de Groot, '"Sex" and "Race"; the Formation of Language and Image in the Nineteenth Century', in Susan Mendus and Jane Rendall (eds.), *Sexuality and Subordination* (London, 1989), pp. 89-128, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, 'African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race', *Signs*, 17, (1992), pp. 251-274, Reina Lewis, *Gendering the Exotic. Race, Femininity and Representation* (London & New York, 1996), Lisa Lowe, *Critical Terrains. French and British Orientalisms* (Ithaca & London, 1991), Felicity A. Nussbaum, *Torrid Zones. Maternity, Sexuality and Empire in Eighteenth Century English Narratives* (Baltimore & London, 1995), Ann Laura Stoler, 'Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Gender, Race and Morality in Colonial Asia', in Michaela di Leonardo (ed.), *Gender at the Crossroads of Knowledge: Feminist Anthropology in the Postmodern Era* (Berkeley, 1991).

ardour of the young, circumscribing sex to marriage, where sexuality could be fulfilled as the expression of love and affection between the couple[56].

Writing in the Scottish enlightened milieu, Robert Wallace affirmed the unproblematic nature of sexual intercourse. As sex was necessary for propagation, 'nature hath not only induced both sexes with a strong inclination to it', 'but hath rendered the Venereal Act highly Delightful when it is performed in obedience to nature'. He was highly sceptical regarding platonic love: 'seldom I believe can a man admire the good qualities of a fine woman's mind and conduct without a secret wish to be familiar with her person. Virtue, honour, prudence may restrain him from any indecency, but his regard is always mixed with something sexual'. However, Wallace should be considered an exceptional figure on account of his vindication of female sexuality and his belief that female delicacy was mere artifice: 'by a false, unnecessary and unnatural refinement some would deny that there is any lust in modest women and virgins, whereas every woman during certain seasons and a certain period of life is incited to lust and would gladly suffer the Venereal commerce with the other sex, unless there is something uncommon in her constitution or she is sickly or under a bad habit of body'. He would not think it 'imprudent or immodest for a woman to make advances' and considered that

---

[56] Roy Porter, 'Mixed Feelings: The Enlightenment and Sexuality in Eighteenth Century Britain', in Paul-Gabriel Boucé (ed.), *Sexuality in Eighteenth Century Britain* (Totowa, New Jersey, 1982), pp. 1-27.

fornication 'should not be accounted as a very great bolt even upon a woman's character'[57].

Roy Porter has argued that enlightened attitudes were related to the remarkable degree of openness, visibility and publicity which, as compared to the standards of other ages, sexuality enjoyed in eighteenth century Britain. Sex played an important part in the printed culture. Novels featuring prostitutes as main characters were widely read, without a tragic ending being demanded as a punishment for a life of vice. Even in the more decorous literature of the last half of the century, novels used sex as one of the elements at stake when developing the plot and tracing the fate of the characters, as in *Pamela*. Sex appeared regularly in prints, political satire and pamphlets, and in journals where sexual services, such as gigolos, prostitutes, brothels, aphrodisiacs and abortifiers, were advertised[58].

Seen less as a sin or a vice, and more as part of the economy of the universe, sexuality figured largely in eighteenth century intellectual discussions and became an object of study for natural history. The workings of the organs of generation and the reproduction of plants were examined by anatomists and naturalists while travellers' accounts provided the intellectual world with extensive information about the sexual mores of savage and primitive societies. There was a growing discussion about the role of sexuality in the private lives of the people and there were manuals which discussed sexual techniques, compatibility, venereal

[57] Quoted in Smith, 'Sexual Mores and Attitudes', pp. 60-61.

[58] Daniel Defoe, (1722) *Moll Flanders* (New York & London, 2004), Richardson, *Pamela* and Porter, 'Mixed Feelings'.

diseases, fertility, birth limitation and reproduction. This amount of information was welcomed by writers such as Mary Wollstonecraft who, demanding that sexuality was treated with naturalness, wrote that 'it would be proper to familiarise the sexes to an unreserved discussion of those topics which are generally avoided in conversation from a principle of false delicacy; and that it would be right to speak of the organs of generation as freely as we mention our eyes or our hands'[59].

Sexuality was very visible in the public arena. Women's garb was conspicuous (and much criticised) by its extremely low *décolletage*. Prostitution grew extraordinarily due in part to the precarious prospects of many rural migrants. In London, particularly, prostitutes were visible in many streets of the city, from common street-walkers to professionals. London became famous for its dissipated mores and its wide-ranging spectrum of sex entertainment. There were shows that featured naked dancing and copulation while bagnios and serrails catered for all sorts of tastes. High class courtesans were prominent among London high society, their fame and economic standing testified by contemporary paintings. Against this dissipated atmosphere Religious Societies and Societies for the Reformation of Manners were founded, enjoying substantial support among the middling orders. Imbued with puritan ideas, they criticised the dissipated mores of the aristocracy but concentrated their moralising efforts mostly on the lower sections of society. They campaigned against prostitution and molly houses, and denounced drunkenness,

[59] Quoted in Porter, 'Mixed Feelings', p. 7.

swearing and everything they considered public lewdness and sin. However, outside their own ranks, their success was limited; their actions were scorned at and ridiculed, and their members had to face the occasional hostility of the popular classes[60].

Although enlightened authors did not deny female sexuality they were reluctant to allow women the freedom and the naturalness which they preached regarding men. The Enlightenment firmly believed that female fidelity was essential to marriage, not only in order to protect male honour but also to avoid disruptions in the transmission of property along the male line. Even if they praised female 'soft' influence over men and advocated social intercourse between the sexes, enlightened authors were deeply suspicious of female sexuality and of the desire which women necessarily excited in men. Accordingly, chastity, decency and delicacy were prescribed as essential traits of femininity.

Women were not the only ones excluded from enlightened tolerant attitudes towards sexuality. The enlightened mentality was frightened of plebeian sexuality. There were fears that sexual license among the lower orders would result in social anarchy and in high levels of fecundity which, given the impossibility of the poor to fend for their children, would become a burden for the national economy. Homosexuality and the sexuality of the young were also rejected by the enlightened discourse as unnatural. Teenage sexuality was in clear contradiction with the current idealisation of childhood innocence; accordingly, while the young

---

[60] Hunt, *The Middling Sort*, p. 101-124, Porter, 'Mixed Feelings'.

were admonished to refrain from masturbation, which was considered the source of terrible ills, the parents were strongly advised to keep a proper distance between the servants and their children to prevent not only sexual encounters but also the early sexual knowledge they could gain from contact with the lower orders. Although at least in London there existed clubs for upper class and lower class homosexuals, only upper class homosexuality – if discreet – was tolerated. The law on sodomy was capital and was exercised in its full savagery against the members of the lower classes. Enlightened authors considered homosexuality an abnormality, as it was incompatible with the reproductive order of nature in which they had placed sexuality, and had nothing to say about the discrimination and severe punishment of homosexuals[61].

At the bottom of the social scale, sexuality was probably a problematic issue, plagued by guilty attitudes towards the body and circumscribed by a domestic economy which sternly dictated the regulation of family size and the production of family offspring under favourable circumstances. Accordingly, traditional communities opted for a model of late marriage, preceded infrequently by premarital sex and followed by practices such as abstinence and *coitus interruptus* in order to keep the family size within the limits of the family economy. At a popular level, eroticism was probably inhibited by the insalubrious conditions under which sexual activities took place. Lack of intimacy in cramped dwellings, dirt and disease might have rendered sexual intercourse infrequent, functional, perfunctory and, in sum, very

[61] Porter, 'Mixed Feelings'.

different from the image of sex as the incarnation of love and tender eroticism[62].

As we have seen, although the bearing of a bastard was the source of social stigma and premarital sex was frowned upon, women from the lower classes were often ready to balance these rules against their actual situation. They consented to intimacy after betrothal, being conscious of the weight traditionally carried by a promise of marriage; they used their sexuality to their advantage in the bargain which every marriage involved, and they consented to free unions and cohabitation when they considered it to be to their benefit. For their part, the nascent working classes often engaged in sexual practices which, in the eyes of their contemporaries, proved the alleged widespread libertinism which pervaded plebeian culture. Among some sections of the working population, children out of wedlock were welcome, as children's work was needed in textile manufactures and the cottage industry, thus contributing rather than hindering the success of the family economy. Plebeian traditions of premarital sex, the value which women's work represented in a wage economy, and the potential contribution of a newborn to the family economy determined that unchastity was not automatically shunned[63].

Among the aristocratic classes, prescriptive notions of feminine chastity were also often diluted. Particularly in the court, sexual mores tended towards a refined libertinism in which mistresses and lovers were kept without much moral ado. It was

---

[62] Gillis, *For Better, for Worse*, Porter, 'Mixed Feelings'.

[63] On working class women, see Clark, *The Struggle for the Breeches* and Gillis, *For Better, for Worse.*

commonplace for elite men to keep mistresses and to walk out in public with them. According to Roy Porter, 'at least in high society, *ménages à trois* and shifting sex liaisons seem to have been easily assimilated, certainly, they were matters of intense gossip and amusement but not necessarily the cause of matrimonial breakdown, duels or psychic disaster'. Few among the aristocracy were ashamed of owning their bastards. Many recognised them and provided for them, as in the case of Edward Walpole, whose illegitimate daughter married Lord Waldegrave and the Duke of Gloucester, George III's brother. While men flaunted their sexual conquests, women might also engage in sexual affairs which could be overlooked by their husbands and by society. Of course, female licentiousness was far less common than male profligacy and this permissiveness was significantly reduced as the discourse of sensibility progressively permeated the aristocratic classes[64].

It seems that, even in this apparently frivolous milieu, guilty attitudes towards sexuality and the body persisted. Obscenity and transgression ran through the pornographic material which circulated among aristocratic circles. Obscenity could be mixed with a kind of eroticism related to social and political dominance, as in the 'Beggar's Bennison', a club founded in 1739 by some sections of the nobility and gentry of Scotland. Among its members there were significant figures such as Sir Charles and Sir Thomas Erskine and the Prince Regent himself. Its meetings included discussions of sexual matters, nude dancing and sex with

---

64 Porter, 'Mixed Feelings', p. 10.

young girls hired from the nearby towns, as well as physical displays, tests and exhibitions of masculinity[65].

REPRODUCTION, PREGNANCY, CHILDREARING AND EDUCATION

In a time when the control of fertility was at a rudimentary stage, reproduction and pregnancy were important and recurring events in women's lives. Far from been a purely private matter, the bearing of children was full of economic, natural and cultural implications. Customs and rituals developed around childbirth, as did myths, superstitions and storytelling. The community welcomed the newborn for it represented its continuity; female neighbours, friends and relations contributed with their support and advice; family economic success or failure often depended on the number of able hands available and, for aristocratic families, the survival of the line was at stake. Even so, pregnancy was still a natural process, fraught with dangers which required dexterous assistance and a great deal of forbearance.

After marriage, the wife's duty was to provide a son who could contribute to the family economy and, one day, inherit the family assets. The pressure was particularly strong in aristocratic families in which economic concerns went together with the necessity of continuing the family line. Since failure to produce children was considered to be the women's fault, and motherhood was exalted as the fulfilment of femininity and marital happiness,

[65] Porter, 'Mixed Feelings', Smith, 'Sexual Mores and Attitudes'.

at all social levels not to have children most probably awakened feelings of failure and inadequacy[66].

Women usually got pregnant during the first year after marriage, there generally being an interval of at least two years between further pregnancies. Demographers have argued that this lapse could be explained by the necessity of a prolonged lactation, due to the lack of a reliable pap substitute to mother's milk. It was also possible that the long intervals between births were the result of frequent miscarriages provoked by poor diet and hard labour. Sexual taboos, such as avoidance of sexual intercourse during breastfeeding lest it might curdle the milk, might have had also a role[67].

It seems that the eighteenth century witnessed an increasing concern about family control, as suggested by the steady rise of the average age of marriage over the period. Women and men often refrained from sexual activity from a conscious desire of restricting the family size. There are proofs that women tried to avoid a new pregnancy until they were fully recovered from the previous one, for they feared the strain of a new lying-in over an already debilitated body. Thus, they resorted to contraception and even to abortifiers. Among the contraceptive methods employed to avoid pregnancy, there were herbal potions, ablutions after intercourse or gum-like devices employed to block the cervix. According to some authors, such as Linda A. Pollock, there is evidence that

---

[66] Fletcher, *Gender, Sex and Subordination*, pp. 181-191, Hufton, *The Prospect before Her*, pp. 173-216.

[67] Hufton, *The Prospect before Her*, pp. 173-216, Trumbach, *The Rise of the Egalitarian Family*.

suggests that women would have provoked abortions in order to protect themselves from the dangers of too frequent pregnancies. Private medical books often contained detailed advice on how to terminate a pregnancy, proving that the necessary knowledge was neither rare nor obscure. As for the success of these methods, some of these recipes included ingredients whose effectiveness as abortifacients is considered proven today[68].

Even if the reproductive years of women were reduced by late marriage (around the age of twenty-six) and a higher age of menarche than today's (around the age of fourteen to sixteen), they still amounted to a dangerous period of her life. Demographers have shown that women were four times more likely to die in the first ten years of marriage than men, and twice as likely in the second ten years. Thereafter, they were more likely to survive than men. Poor nutrition, resulting in a small bone structure and deformed bones, made pregnancy riskier and increased the chances of difficult labour and miscarriages. Among the upper ranks, a diet which included generous amounts of salty food and strong alcohol could result in difficulties during pregnancy and provoke miscarriages. However, there are authors who have argued that the danger of dying in childbed has been exaggerated. According to Roger Schofield, the corrected figure of maternal deaths for the period 1750-1800 would be eight per one thousand live births, which indicates a tendency towards a

---

[68] Hufton, *The Prospect before Her*, pp. 173-216, Linda Pollock, 'Embarking on a Rough Passage: The Experience of Pregnancy in Early Modern Society', in Valerie Fildes (ed.), *Women as Mothers in Pre-Industrial England* (London & New York, 1990), pp. 39-67 and Smith, *Changing Lives*, pp. 12-19.

reduction of mortality as a result of the improvements in the obstetrical practice and hygiene. Yet, Amanda Vickery has remarked that 'prenatal complications was probably the single most common cause of death in women aged twenty five to thirty four, accounting for one in five of all deaths in this age group'[69].

Even if maternal mortality was lower than it has been commonly thought, women viewed pregnancy as a hazardous period. For them, their relatives and spouses the prospect of not surviving a birth was very real. As infant mortality was still very high, women fretted about how robust would be the child and how long would the infant live. Women confided to their diaries and correspondence their fears and anxieties. Some spoke of 'the day of my affliction' when referring to the date expected for labour to take place. Others prepared themselves to death, devoting themselves to pious reflection and drawing up letters for the child still unborn. They turned to Christian stoic attitudes which recommended resignation in the face of an unpredictable fate[70].

Not only were emotional confusion, melancholy and depressed spirits routinely associated with pregnancy, women also suffered from nausea, infections and pain. Ill health was not only considered inevitable – it was the curse of Eve – but also deemed a

---

[69] Lawrence, *Women in England*, pp. 27-38, Pollock, 'Embarking on a Rough Passage', Roger Schofield, 'Did the Mothers Really Die? Three Centuries of Maternal Mortality in 'The World We Have Lost'', in Lloyd Bonfield, Richard M. Smith and Keith Wrightson (eds.), *The World We Have Gained. Histories of Population and Social Structure* (Oxford & New York, 1986), pp. 231-260, Smith, *Changing Lives*, pp. 12-19, Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter*.

[70] Pollock, 'Embarking on a Rough Passage', Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter*, pp. 87-126. On infant mortality, see Lawrence, *Women in England*, pp. 27-38 and Smith, *Changing Lives*, p. 15.

good sign, the proof that the foetus was thriving. Women from the upper ranks were confined to the marital or maternal home, their mobility restricted and physical activity discouraged. Among the lower ranks, physical efforts and hard work could hardly be avoided and added up to the strain and risks of pregnancy[71].

Female apprehensions did not stem from ignorance about the pregnancy process. They could accurately judge the time of conception, the stage of gestation and the imminence of birth, which was essential to complete the antenatal preparations. Genteel families mobilised their female relations to accompany the mother-to-be during her confinement, hire the nursery maid, procure the midwife or physician, and sometimes an appropriate wet nurse. Lower down the social scale, female relatives, friends and neighbours were also involved, contributing with their experience and support. When labour was close, the midwife was called and a female company assembled to supervise and help the mother through her pains. Traditionally this was part of a birth ritual, controlled by women, from which men were excluded. This ritual was eroded by the introduction of male-midwives who, in time, would come to dominate the lying-in[72].

There is a historiographical controversy concerning the growing power of the male-midwife which put an end to this ritual

---

71 Pollock, 'Embarking on a Rough Passage', Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter*, pp. 87-126.

72 Fletcher, *Gender, Sex and Subordination*, pp. 181-191, Hufton, *The Prospect before Her*, pp. 173-216, Pollock, 'Embarking on a Rough Passage', Smith, *Changing Lives*, pp. 12-19, Trumbach, *The Rise of the Egalitarian Family*, Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter*, pp. 87-126, A Wilson, 'The Ceremony of Childbirth and its Interpretation', in Valerie Fildes (ed.), *Women as Mothers in Pre-Industrial England* (London & New York, 1990), pp. 68-107.

and to the traditional monopoly of midwives over childbirth, at least among the well-to-do. Some authors would go so far as to claim the lying-in chamber as the main site of a female culture of resistance to patriarchal power and to consider the rise the male obstetrician as a usurpation and invasion of the female body[73]. While some authors have emphasised the advancement of medical standards derived from this change, others have vindicated the capability of midwives and denied eighteenth century invectives against their ignorance and life-threatening errors[74]. Surely, the increasing role of male practitioners in the management of childbirth should be related to misogynist traditions rooted in scientific discourses which denied women's claims to knowledge and scientific expertise[75].

Contemporary data shows that the introduction of male practitioners was more the result of female agency than of male authority. In the eighteenth century, pamphlets, essays and articles abounded with descriptions of the male-midwife as a predatory being, prying indecently on a female sanctum. These diatribes bear witness to a husbandly horror which was however more concerned with protecting contemporary standards of female delicacy from fashionable libertinism than with the well-being of the mother-to-be. By contrast, influenced either by the alleged skill of male

---

[73] Wilson, 'The Ceremony of Childbirth'.

[74] Smith, *Changing Lives*, pp. 12-19.

[75] Londa Schiebinger, *The Mind Has No Sex? Women in the Origins of Modern Science* (Cambridge, Mass., 1989), Ludmilla Jordanova, *Sexual Visions. Images of Gender in Science and Medicine between the Eighteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Madison, Wisconsin, 1989) and Ludmilla Jordanova, *Nature Displayed. Gender, Science and Medicine, 1760-1820* (London & New York, 1999).

practitioners in obstructed and complicated labour or by the association between male obstetricians and fashion, politeness and status, women from the upper ranks increasingly demanded the services of these professionals. Women could also use the authoritative voice of the male accoucheur to back their own preferences and choices in front of reluctant husbands or traditional female relatives[76].

Although pregnancy has been traditionally considered as a feminine affair, husbands had a role to play once the reproductive process was underway. Moralists and conduct writers advised men to be particularly sympathetic to their wives when they were carrying child, preventing them from any superfluous discomfort or physical effort. As we have seen, husbands thought they had a great deal to say about the convenience of hiring a male surgeon who would deliver their wives. There is evidence showing that husbands feared a great deal about the well-being and safe delivery of their wives and, even if they were excluded from the lying-in chamber, they were required by their wives to be at home[77].

The postnatal period was still seen as a period of risk to the mother as well as the baby, due to the dangers of puerperal fever, haemorrhage, thrombosis and milk fever. Accordingly, after childbirth, women were, little by little and only if they were well and the baby thriving, allowed out of their room and introduced

---

[76] For a summary of this controversy, see Hufton, *The Prospect before Her*, pp. 173-216, Smith, *Changing Lives*, pp. 12-19, Trumbach, *The Rise of the Egalitarian Family*, Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter*, pp. 94-97.

[77] Fletcher, *Gender, Sex and Subordination*, pp. 181-191, Pollock, 'Embarking on a Rough Passage', Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter*, pp. 87-126.

back to society, receiving the closest relations first and other acquaintances as their health improved. Among the upper classes a nurse was hired to supervise her recovery and help her with the nursing of the child[78].

Infant feeding became the subject of a heated debate during the eighteenth century. Up to this date aristocratic families hired wet nurses to feed their babies. Wet nursing had been advocated on the grounds that healthy rural women produced more nourishing milk than their upper class counterparts and on the belief that city life was potentially damaging for the newborn. Accordingly, women from the city elite and even from the urban middle classes who could afford it would hire a wet nurse rather than feed the baby themselves. Long-lasting taboos objecting to sexual intercourse as long as lactation took place might have also had a role in encouraging the practice, as well as the lack of adequate substitutes for mother's milk. Besides, lactation was believed to hinder the recovery of the mother from the weakening effects of childbirth[79].

However, during the eighteenth century wet nursing came under attack by the advocates of breastfeeding whose ideas gained ground among the aristocracy and upper classes. Campaigning for a deeper involvement of the mother in childrearing, supporters of breastfeeding argued that it was not only healthier but also

---

[78] Hufton, *The Prospect before Her*, pp. 173-216 and Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter*, pp. 87-126.

[79] See Fletcher, *Gender, Sex and Subordination*, pp. 181-191, Hufton, *The Prospect before Her*, pp. 173-216, Trumbach, *The Rise of the Egalitarian Family* and Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter*, pp. 107-110.

psychologically beneficial as the intimate physical contact would result in a strong emotional attachment between mother and child. The decline of wet nursing should be also analysed in the light of contemporary socio-economic processes which hindered this practice. As a result of the polarisation of rural society, the status of the wet nurse moved downwards the social scale, contradicting arguments about the healthiness of their milk. In addition, it seems that the wet nursed child was actually more at risk than his maternally nursed counterpart for, according to statistical data, one in five noble boys in England died in infancy in comparison with the national norm of one in seven. A higher acceptability of diluted cow's milk as a substitute restricted the practice among women too weak to breastfeed. Even so, mother's choice was often limited by poor health and husband's authority, and influenced by the advice of her relatives, often attached to the old ways[80].

Some authors, in the line of Philippe Ariès, have considered the higher incidence of maternal breastfeeding as a proof of the rise of maternal tenderness and of the emergence of an 'egalitarian', more affectionate, family life. According to these authors, the eighteenth century witnessed the birth of a more egalitarian family ethos in which a loving attachment between the spouses was coupled by a tender involvement in the education and well-being of the children[81]. However, subsequent researchers

---

[80] See Fletcher, *Gender, Sex and Subordination*, pp. 181-191, Hufton, *The Prospect before Her*, pp. 173-216, Trumbach, *The Rise of the Egalitarian Family* and Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter*, pp. 107-110.

[81] See Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500-1800* (London, 1977) and Trumbach, *The Rise of the Egalitarian Family*.

remain deeply sceptical about this thesis, questioning the value of breastfeeding as a token of deeper involvement and heightened concern for the children, and arguing that motherly love can hardly be circumscribed to modern times. These authors have emphasised that there is evidence of parental affection and emotional involvement in childrearing previous to the eighteenth century[82].

Be as it may, eighteenth century discourses evince a growing attention towards children's education and childrearing and an unremitting idealisation and celebration of motherhood. Authors such as Locke published treaties on infant education in consonance with his theories on the importance of first impressions in the formation of the personality and acquisition of knowledge. He argued for an education based on softer methods which encouraged autonomy and freedom. Rousseau famously devoted part of his book *Émile* to praise the benefits of a thorough maternal involvement during the first years of childhood. Similarly, he advocated a higher degree of interaction between the child and his tutor as the basis of a new system of education, which should follow the child's personality rather than trying to mould his character through harsh discipline. At the same time, the mother was singled out as the person more fitted to perform the childrearing duties with success, being naturally endowed to tend to the children. Motherhood was exalted as women's most natural role and the figure of the dutiful mother was cherished in essays, novels and prints. Many women found these ideas empowering, as

[82] See Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter*, pp. 107-110.

proved by the immense popularity of Rousseau among female readers. The new glorification of motherhood was even echoed by early feminists who grounded their claims to education and rights on women's role as mothers, now conceived as patriotic duty[83].

The first years of a child's life were highly demanding for the parents and particularly for women. At all social levels, the care and responsibility for young children fell principally to the mother, even among genteel families who hired a nursery maid to help the mother. In addition, anxieties about the character of the nurses prompted many families to restrict their services to particularly busy periods. After childbirth, the many illnesses which the child could suffer were the greatest fear of the parents. Dysentery, smallpox, diphtheria, typhus and different kinds of fever endangered recurrently the children's life and put the parents under a heavy emotional strain. Yet, although the concern for the survival of the child was shared by the couple, the full burden of nursing fell to the mother[84].

Concerned about the health of their offspring, genteel parents frequently changed abode, seeking in summer the fresh air and openness of the countryside where there were less chances of suffering from epidemic outbreaks. When hired, nursemaids were seen as a supplement to the mother, performing mainly menial

---

[83] See Hufton, *The Prospect before Her*, pp. 173-216, Rousseau, *Émile*, Trumbach, *The Rise of the Egalitarian Family*. On the reception of the new pedagogic ideas in Scotland, see Craig Beveridge, 'Childhood and Society in Eighteenth Century Scotland', in John Dwyer, Roger Mason and Alexander Murdoch (eds.), *New Perspectives on Politics and Culture of Early Modern Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1982), pp. 265-290.

[84] See Hufton, *The Prospect before Her*, pp. 173-216 and Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter*, pp. 87-126.

tasks such as washing, cleaning and sewing. Mothers took seriously their responsibilities in the education, amusement and disciplining of the children as attested by diaries and letters which show that children were the daily companions of their mothers. Women read avidly the available literature on childcare and education. They went for walks, organised parties and small plays. They taught their children reading, writing, spelling, and even Latin grammar, accounts and geography. As a result, during these years women's letter writing, sociability and mobility decreased drastically for, as Amanda Vickery has remarked, 'motherhood devoured almost all reserves of physical and emotional energy for, at the very least, a decade of a fertile woman's life'[85].

In spite of the efforts it demanded, mothers felt intensely the rewards of childrearing. Even if the risk of a premature death was always present, contemporary diaries and letters prove that, far from the cool detachment which allegedly dominated parent-child relations in the periods of high infant mortality, parents were strongly attached to their children. In the closing decades of the eighteenth century, Ellen Weeton Stock wrote to a friend on her delight in her little child:

> my little Mary improves, and is the delight of all; she is just sixteen months old. She does not say a word yet, notwithstanding which, she has a thousand little engaging actions. Her hair is very light, and curls all over her head like a little mop; and she is all over so fat and so soft. I have many a kiss in the course of the day, and many a laugh after her little droll ways; her father would be quite lost without

[85] Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter*, p. 114. See Hufton, *The Prospect before Her*, pp. 173-216, Trumbach, *The Rise of the Egalitarian Family*.

> her, and I am sure, so should I. I wish I had another.... but hush! don't tell![86].

Similarly, fathers publicised in their letters their enjoyment of family life and their affection for their children. Writing in 1763, William Ramsden could hardly restrain his joy and pride when contemplating his family,

> from the arm of my Wife's easy Chair, a Situation I wo'd not change [with] the king of Prussia: no, nor (with a Man a million more times to be envy'ed) with George the Third King of Great Britain: my good Woman at the same time with Glee in her Eye, contemplating her little Boy, who also in his turn seems as happy as this World can make him, only [with] his Leather Bottle, Pardon this Gossip, Good Madam Parker, but the Air of a Nursery is Infecting[87].

Boys spent their first years under the supervision of their mothers who provided them with a basic education. After that, and still very young, boys were severed from motherly care and sent to the masculine environment of the boarding school. They generally left the family home to board in grammar schools or in the public and more prestigious schools of Eton and Winchester. Aristocratic parents sent their young to the university, which being valued more for the veneer of politeness and the useful connexions it offered than for its scholarly training, attracted also some among the genteel youngsters. Among the aristocracy, it was very common to embark on the Grand Tour, a rite of passage

---

[86] Quoted in Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter*, p. 121. See also Fletcher, *Gender, Sex and Subordination*, pp. 181-191.

[87] Quoted in Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter*, p. 123. See also Fletcher, *Gender, Sex and Subordination*, pp. 181-191.

which endowed young men with the refinement and the practical learning which could be acquired by travelling in the continent and getting familiar with the cultural and artistic achievements of France, Italy or Greece[88].

Driven by the desire to imitate their social superiors, the middling orders sent their children to grammar schools, in spite of their classical curriculum. However, it became increasingly common among middle class boys to attend dissenting academies which taught a more useful curriculum, as it included business skills[89].

By contrast, upper class girls' education took place mainly in the family home which they would only leave to marry. Strict supervision by the mother and family relatives was considered essential to protect their chastity, and indeed it seems it was, taking into account the low rates of illegitimacy among the well-to-do. The luckiest could profit from the private tutors hired to supervise their brothers' education, while liberal families hired a governess who would supervise the education of their daughters. The eighteenth century witnessed an expansion of girl's schooling, thus offering for the first time an alternative to a private education at home. There were day schools in which the pupils came back home every day, but most of them were boarding schools. The curriculum typically included useful subjects such as reading, writing and arithmetic and the so-called polite accomplishments such as French, dancing, drawing and music. The most demanded

---

[88] Fletcher, *Gender, Sex and Subordination*, pp. 297-322, Trumbach, *The Rise of the Egalitarian Family*.

[89] Hunt, *The Middling Sort*, pp. 62-65.

and renowned expanded the curriculum and taught grammar and literature, geography, history, and some notions of natural philosophy. They were generally located in rural surroundings as fresh air, open grounds for daily walks and the healthiness of the spot were much valued by the parents[90].

WOMEN AT RISK

We have already seen that marriage entailed many disadvantages and potential pitfalls for women. However, patriarchal ideology, and economic and legal disabilities determined that life outside marriage was riskier. Widowhood was often followed by destitution while spinsterhood entailed family dependence for necessities and survival. Recent research has illuminated with statistical data the known fact that women were particularly vulnerable to poverty and social exclusion. According to Richard Connors, in eighteenth century Britain, over eighty percent of those classed as poor were women as well as over sixty percent of those seeking parish relief[91].

Widowed women were one of the more vulnerable sections among female population. If a woman survived her fertile years,

---

[90] Hufton, *The Prospect before Her*, pp. 173-216, Susan Skedd, 'Women Teachers and the Expansion of Girls' Schooling in England, c. 1760-1820', in Hannah Barker and Elaine Chalus (eds.), *Gender in Eighteenth Century England. Roles, Representations and Responsibilities* (London & New York, 1997), pp. 101-125 and Janet Todd, 'Introduction', in Janet Todd (ed.), *Female Education in the Age of Enlightenment* (London, 1996).

[91] Richard Connors, 'Poor Women, the Parish and the Politics of Poverty', in Hannah Barker and Elaine Chalus (eds.), *Gender in Eighteenth Century England. Roles, Representations and Responsibilities* (London & New York, 1997), pp. 126-147.

she was more likely to reach old age than her partner. In addition, widows were not likely to remarry. Widowers usually remarried single women who would bring with them a new dowry and no other children who could lay economic claims to the family assets. Social and cultural factors prompted men to remarry. Widowers needed badly the non-paid work that a wife performed, namely the care of the children, household work and assistance in the farm or workshop. Besides, it was considered 'unmanly' and 'demeaning' to perform the duties which culturally had been ascribed to women. Accordingly, there was a far greater proportion of widows than widowers[92].

There were enormous differences in the living conditions of widows, depending on age, the number of children or the financial situation of the deceased husband. Thus, if the husband had been a master artisan, there were greater possibilities for the widow to remarry, for journeymen often sought to join mastership ranks in this way. Among the artisan and middling classes, it was not uncommon for widows to continue the husband's craft or business. In these cases, women moved to places where the regulations were softer and avoided a remarriage which could deprive them from autonomy and the management of their economic assets. By contrast, women could be reduced to misery if they inherited the husband's debts or had a number of young children to provide for. In the countryside, the lack of a husband entailed severe difficulties as the management of a farm needed the collaboration of both spouses. Although, given the variety of

[92] Hufton, *The Prospect before Her*, pp. 217- 250.

situations it is difficult to make any generalisation, it is safe to affirm, as Olwen Hufton has, that 'in any situation it was impossible for a widow to be richer by the death of her husband than she was during his lifetime. What she could secure was a greater autonomy'[93].

As the high number of widows which figured in the lists of parish relief evince, widows, more often than not, toiled in the brink of destitution. Parish relief amounted only 'to half or a third of what was needed to feed, keep warm and shelter a single person'[94]. The threat of poverty drew many women to the cities where they could work in the female crafts, such as dressmaking or needlework, which however demanded long hours with little monetary reward. One solution was to cluster together in groups of two or three (just as spinsters did) in order to share rental, lighting and heating expenses. Accordingly, aristocrats, gentry and the middling orders sought to protect their widows and alleviate their need. The well-to-do established portions and jointures in marriage settlements. Guilds and other occupational groups had already a tradition of providing pensions or lump sum payments for their widows and orphans. Among the middling orders it was common to contract life insurances and annuities which would protect the family after the husband's death. Some professional

---

[93] Hufton, *The Prospect before Her*, p. 230. On widow's presence in the printing trades, see Hannah Barker, 'Women, Work and the Industrial Revolution: Female Involvement in the English Printing Trades, c. 1700-1840', in Hannah Barker and Elaine Chalus (eds.), *Gender in Eighteenth Century England. Roles, Representations and Responsibilities* (London & New York, 1997), pp. 81-100. On middle class widows, see Hunt, *The Middling Sort*, pp. 164-166.

[94] Hufton, *The Prospect before Her*, p. 249.

groups organised charities which cared for orphans, widows or maiden daughters, such as the Corporation of the Sons of the Clergy. We should underline that, in what has been considered a germ of gender identity, women were prominent among the donors of these charities[95].

Similarly, spinsterhood often meant a life of economic need, dependence and lovelessness. Single women depended upon family and friends or upon a makeshift economy of hard toil and low wages to survive, living in fear of descent into old age or ill-health. As Olwen Hufton has remarked, single women tended to die before their married counterparts. In a society where marriage was considered the only destiny for women, spinsterhood was generally not the result of choice. Even so, some single women were ready to say 'really there is so much Care in a Married State and fiddle faddle in most Men's Tempers that I Esteem vastly happier in having nothing to do with'em'. However, only the luckiest, that is, those who had been endowed with enough financial assets to ensure comfortable living standards, could scorn those who had tied themselves to the marital estate[96].

Spinsterhood rose in times when economic conditions worsened. In these times, the economic independence which should precede marriage was difficult to achieve and the unmarried population rose. Besides, young girls could easily be precluded

---

[95] Hufton, *The Prospect before Her*, pp. 217-50 and Hunt, *The Middling Sort*, pp. 164-166.

[96] Written by a spinster as quoted in Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter*, p. 40. On spinsterhood, see Hufton, *The Prospect before Her*, pp. 251-255.

from saving enough to accumulate an attractive dowry, finding it difficult to get adequate salaries in domestic service or manufactures. While unmarried men had options such as the navy or the army, single women had to survive on wages which were calculated on the assumption that women did not live independently but complemented a male based family economy[97].

The aristocracy registered a high level of spinsterhood (25-30%). Aristocratic spinsters were generally safe from the acutest economic pitfalls of spinsterhood, although they might have resented their dependence and the downwards socio-economic move which their situation entailed. Some sought refuge on charity schemes and intellectual pleasures as their prominent role in philanthropic initiatives and on subscription lists of booksellers suggest[98].

Among the middle orders it was not uncommon to find women whose marital prospects were sacrificed for the sake of a male oriented family economy. Women's unpaid collaboration at home, the workshop or as clerical assistants was essential for the success of many middle class businesses while their part of the inheritance was a much needed credit supply. Many of these women who lived with their brothers as helpers and assistants were likely to suffer from an unsympathetic sister-in-law or when reaching old age and their services were no longer required. Ellin Stout (1665-1752) was kept at home in charge of her young brothers so that her mother could help in the family farm and do

---

[97] Hufton, *The Prospect before Her*, p. 252.

[98] Hufton, *The Prospect before Her*, p. 252.

the household work. She was discouraged from marriage and become the housekeeper and shop assistant of her brother while her portion of the family fortune was systematically employed by her bothers as a source of loans for their businesses[99].

Prostitution was a professional getaway for single women deprived from family support or from economic resources. It was not uncommon for independent women living on female crafts to resort to prostitution in order to complete an insufficient income. Married women from the lower ranks also turned to prostitution when the family income dwindled. Police records tell us of arrested prostitutes who were milliners, mantua makers, haberdashers, tavern workers, charwomen, thus giving proof of the precarious situation of the female worker[100].

Prostitution increased in the eighteenth century, as a result of the economic polarisation of the countryside, city growth and the concentration in towns of poor girls whose earning power was severely limited. In a country where there were no licensed brothels, prostitutes took to the streets. Contemporary accounts relate that London swarmed with prostitutes who were distributed geographically according to their rank, from the refined courtesans of St. James to the lower end of the trade in Southwark and Billingsgate[101].

---

[99] Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Fortunas familiares. Hombres y mujeres de la clase media inglesa, 1780-1850* (Madrid, 1987) and Hunt, *The Middling Sort*, particularly pp. 80-83.

[100] Clark, *The Struggle for the Breeches*, pp. 45-62 and Hufton, *The Prospect before Her*, pp. 299-331.

[101] Hufton, *The Prospect before Her*, pp. 299-331.

Although the first part of the eighteenth century witnessed permissive attitudes towards prostitution – reflected on the emergence of the prostitute as a literary archetype –, its steady rise prompted concerns about the moral implications of the trade. Authors such as Bernard Mandeville advocated the establishment of licensed brothels arguing that regulated prostitution was needed in order to protect virtuous women from rapacious males and keep venereal diseases at bay. These assumptions were grounded on the deep-rooted assumption that some women were naturally lascivious and thus ready to engage in sexual commerce. By contrast, non conformist observers sought to eliminate the phenomenon as a whole. They believed that women were driven to prostitution by necessity, deception or if reared in the corrupted habits of the morally suspicious poor. Accordingly, they sought to provide the lower classes with a moral education while combining punishment and reform in their dealing with prostitutes. Prominent among these initiatives were the charity schools for the poor, the Magdalene Hospital in London, intended for the protection and reform of fallen women, and the Societies for the Reform of Manners, aimed at the prosecution of whoredom[102].

---

102 Hufton, *The Prospect before Her*, pp. 299-331. See also Defoe, *Moll Flanders*, Hunt, *The Middling Sort*, pp. 101-116, and Randolph Trumbach, 'Sex, Gender and Sexual Identity in Modern Culture: Male Sodomy and Feminine Prostitution in Enlightenment London', in John C. Fout (ed.), *Forbidden History. The State, Society and the Regulation of Sexuality in Modern Europe* (Chicago & London, 1992), pp. 89-106.

WOMEN AT WORK

Work in the eighteenth century was strictly grounded on a sexual division of labour which followed logically from the attitudes to women we have already mentioned. Men retained a privileged position as befitting their rule over women and the following subordination of the latter. Male biased definitions of work emphasised physical and mental strength, skill and economic independence while characterising women as primarily reproductive beings given to idleness and a life of ease. By this division, women were restricted to unremunerated household drudgery, childrearing duties, and underpaid forms of sweat labour, all of which, however, were essential to the economy. In addition, women's decisive contribution to the family economy was systematically neglected for she had no or little control over her earnings and the family assets.

Recent research has emphasised that female contribution to the family economy went beyond household duties. It is difficult to trace women's economic activities for sometimes they are invisible to the historian as they scarcely leave any written record. Women lacked the formal structure of the male trades and often did not declare their occupation, being subsumed under their husband's economic persona. Even so, evidence from trials show that women who worked for pay assigned a value to their skills, grouped together to compensate for their lack of capital and were

sometimes supported by their husbands in their economic ventures[103].

There has been an important historiographical controversy concerning the consequences of the industrial revolution for women's work and situation which still underlie many discussions on the matter. The traditional approach, represented by pioneers in women's history, such as Bridget Hill and Alice Clark, has argued that the development of manufactures and proto-industrialisation resulted in the marginal economic position of women and in an overall loss of status for them. The rise of capitalism in agriculture and rural manufactures eroded the traditional family economy, which was characterised by equality between the contribution of men and women, and provoked a shift in female working patterns, giving way to a sexual division of labour and resulting in overtly male dominance and female loss of status, earning power and independence. As a result, housework was devalued as unproductive and advocated as women's destiny while opportunities of paid work for women were restricted to unskilled, unstable and low paid occupations[104].

Recent approaches to the industrial revolution have challenged this vision. They have questioned the 'revolutionary'

---

[103] See for instance, Barker, 'Women, Work and the Industrial Revolution', Clark, *The Struggle for the Breeches*, Davidoff and Hall, *Fortunas familiares*, Hunt, *The Middling Sort* and Skedd, 'Women Teachers and the Expansion of Girls' Schooling'.

[104] M. McKeon, 'Historising Patriarchy: The Emergence of Gender Difference in England, 1660-1760', *Eighteenth Century Studies*, 28, (1995), pp. 295-322. On this debate, see Barker and Chalus (eds.), *Gender in Eighteenth Century England*, introduction, and Katrina Honeyman, *Women, Gender and Industrialisation in England, 1700-1870* (London, 2000).

nature of the industrial revolution, remarking that far from being a sudden and dramatic change, this process was firmly rooted in seventeenth and eighteenth century dynamics such as the growth of commercialisation, manufactures and urbanisation. According to these authors, the industrial revolution affected different areas in different ways and at various times, and, thus, it did not necessarily entail the dissolution of the traditional family economy. Having dismissed the early modern period as a moment of gender equality, they have stressed the importance of continuities over conspicuous but less relevant changes, arguing, as Fletcher has, that 'the essential features of women's economic positions relative to men – the sex ratio of wages, access to training, concentration in the lowest paid sectors of the market and sexual division of labour in the household – all seem to have been unaffected by capitalism and industrialisation'. While accepting that women were progressively excluded from some traditional occupations during this period, recent research has shown that new economic avenues were also opened for women as industrialisation advanced[105].

Rural Women

Women living in the countryside usually abandoned the family home in their early youth in order to perform paid work which would enable them to save for a dowry. However, saving

---

[105] Examples of this new perspective on women's work are Barker, 'Women, Work and the Industrial Revolution', Clark, *The Struggle for the Breeches*, Fletcher, *Gender, Sex and Subordination*, pp. 223-282, Davidoff and Hall, *Fortunas familiares*, Honeyman, *Women, Gender and Industrialisation*, Hufton, *The Prospect before Her*, Hunt, *The Middling Sort* and Skedd, 'Women Teachers and the Expansion of Girls' Schooling'.

was not easy as evinced by the long periods rural girls spent working for their dowry (between twelve and fifteen years). They were generally paid a lump sum only after many years of service as it was considered that board and food were the main part of their earnings. Girls tried to place themselves in nearby farms where they could be hired as farm servants, learning the necessary skills of pickling, malting, salting, preserving by smoking or storing in grease or brine. They could join the farm staff at its lower levels, cleaning and carrying water to, having learnt the essential skills, become brewers or dairymaids whose services were much demanded[106].

However, the spread of agricultural capitalism lessened the opportunities for farm servants and thus, as the century advanced, more and more girls went to the cities and towns to find work in the domestic service. Following regional trends and established migratory flows, girls went to the cities to supply the rising demand for servants which resulted from the sophistication of society and the growth of the middle classes. Domestic service had its own hierarchy, starting with the simple maid for all work who had to carry out the more tiresome and unskilled tasks such as fetching water, wood and coal. However, having some skills, education or recommendation, a girl could reach the much sought after higher positions of nursery maid, cook, or laundry maid, in which work was less strenuous and wages higher. Even so, the top posts of lady's maid and housekeeper were often closed to girls from rural origins, since they were much demanded by middle

[106] Hufton, *The Prospect before Her*, pp. 59-90.

class girls endowed with gentle skills but whose families could not afford to give them a dowry[107].

In the regions where industrial work was available, girls could go to the towns and join the ranks of the textile workers or remain at home and earn some money by working in the putting out system. In the regions where the cottage industry had developed, accumulating a dowry was not as important as gaining the skills which would allow women to make a sustained contribution to the family economy. Not all the girls who moved to the towns and cities with dowry accumulation and marriage in mind were successful. Periods and unemployment, industrial slump, sickness, or succumbing to a man whose intentions were dishonourable could come in the girl's way, making the return to the family town impossible and determining her joining the ranks of the urban working women[108].

After marriage, the care of cows and chicken, milking cows, plucking the fowl, preparing the food and taking it to the fields, baking bread and making soup, collecting firewood and water, and tending the fires, all fell to women besides cleaning and childrearing. All of these were exhausting and energy demanding tasks which were essential for the survival of the family unit[109].

In addition, women were responsible for the cash contributions and productive activities which ensured the self-sufficiency and the viability of the family unit. Women made

---

[107] Hufton, *The Prospect before Her*, pp. 59-90.

[108] Hufton, *The Prospect before Her*, pp. 59-90.

[109] Smith, *Changing Lives*, pp. 6-12.

clothes, linen and cheese, brewed, preserved food, tended the family garden and salted the meat, among other activities, which provided the family with basic necessities which could not be purchased. Cash entered the family unit through women who went to the market to sell agricultural produce and did spinning for pay. They obtained the raw fibre, especially cotton, and washed, picked and combed it. The finished products were sent to town to be woven into cloth for the growing urban population. The cash gathered from spinning and market transactions was vital for paying taxes and the rent. Indeed, as Bonnie G. Smith has remarked, 'few rural households could have survived without women's cash contribution'[110].

The agricultural revolution ended some traditional female tasks. Community's common rights were eroded, virtually ending women's long-standing contributions to the agricultural process such as gleaning the fields after harvest. Technical innovations coupled with ideological constructs, such as the belief in women's weakness and complementary role to men, determined female exclusion from harvesting and day-labouring. Bigger farms, the introduction of labour-saving machinery, and the emergence of male intermediaries led to the progressive contraction of opportunities for women in dairying which was in addition considered too physically demanding for women's frail constitutions. As a result, women turned increasingly to outside work to supplement the family economy[111].

---

[110] Smith, *Changing Lives*, p. 10.

[111] Fletcher, *Gender, Sex and Subordination*, pp. 246-255 and Smith, *Changing Lives*, pp. 44-51.

Urban Women

Even if the rate of rural women taking outside work increased, they still lagged behind their urban counterparts, being most of them immersed in a farm-centred subsistence economy. By contrast, recent research shows that women from urban milieus worked extensively for pay. The foremost example of this trend was London, where by 1700 seventy-two per cent of women were doing paid work outside the home[112].

However, even if they were an important section of the urban labour force, women were rarely admitted into formal apprenticeship and were excluded from the formal structure of the guilds. Women learned their trade mostly at home, which could explain the tendency to continue the family business by marrying a man of the same trade or by themselves, following the mother's occupation or that of an aunt. Seamstresses, chocolate-markers and tavern keepers trained their daughters and cousins who helped to run the business from an early age. Women's collaboration was soon demanded in the family business: they kept the books, run errands or provided food for apprentices or journeymen. Young girls were introduced to the semi-skilled processes of the craft and thus, artisans sought women from a family of the same trade so that after marriage they could count on their wife's assistance and knowledge of the craft[113].

Women formal apprenticeships existed, although they amounted to a tiny percentage of the whole. Among these, there

---

[112] Fletcher, *Gender, Sex and Subordination*, p. 243.

[113] Hufton, *The Prospect before Her*, pp. 59-90 and Smith, *Changing Lives*, pp. 33-39.

was the compulsory apprenticeship of poor children in which the ratio of girls reached thirty-four per cent in the eighteenth century. This period saw an enlargement of the range of occupations involved; girls could learn such specialised crafts as blanket-making, gloving, hatting, bricklaying, dyeing, tanning, rope-making, tobacco pipe making and watch gilding. Yet, apprenticeships arranged by parish officers were usually in housewifery and even when a specialised craft was pursued, general domestic work occupied much of the female apprentice's time. Although the interpretation of the data is difficult, it seems very unlikely that these girls acquired enough expertise, resources or confidence to set up an independent business. Their being indentured did not have, apparently, economic independence as its end; the aim was rather to render them more attractive to a prospective husband by endowing them with the sufficient skills that would allow them to assist him in his trade[114].

Regarding apprenticeships entered by parental choice, the existing data for the beginning of the eighteenth century varies from 3.6 per cent to 7.4 per cent. Evidence shows girls apprenticed to male trades such as carpentry, cordwainery and ironmongery but mostly to 'genteel' trades such as millinery, mantua making, toy making or mercery. This data suggests that parents from the middling orders, who could afford to pay for the training, were reluctant to procure a formal practical instruction for their daughters and preferred instead to integrate informally the girls'

---

114 Fletcher, *Gender, Sex and Subordination*, pp. 240-243 and Hunt, *The Middling Sort*, pp. 90-92.

working output into the family economy or to endow them with the polite accomplishments which would render them more valuable in an upstart marriage strategy. One should not forget that women had less opportunities of getting a remunerative occupation than men and that the vast majority of jobs in which women were likely to be found were low paid and insecure. It seems very likely that the scarcity of options was a disincentive for many girls (or their families) when considering training or starting a business on their own[115].

Urban women contributed to the family economy in different ways. Their dowry often allowed an artisan to quit dependent labour by opening his own shop. Women's work was essential for the trade to thrive. Women packed, delivered, sold the goods and tended the shop, carried wood and water, and cared for the journeymen, apprentices and servants. They also helped in the productive process, performing semi-skilled tasks such as polishing and finishing in the case of the metal trades. Women were essential in the food trades, for they preserved by smoking, made sausages and other food products, and were in charge of the shop or market stall, allowing the husband to concentrate in slaughtering and dealing with the suppliers. Besides, childrearing and the household chores fell always to women. If the business succeeded, the amount of work women performed could be lessened by hiring servants[116].

---

115 Fletcher, *Gender, Sex and Subordination*, pp. 240-243 and Hunt, *The Middling Sort*, pp. 90-92.

116 Hufton, *The Prospect before Her*, pp. 59-90 and Smith, *Changing Lives*, pp. 33-39.

Some women pursued their own trades even when married. Women were prominent in glove-making, lace-making, hat-making, and in the silk industry; they were seamstresses and produced small items such as buttons, pins and candles. Indeed, the clothing industry was a female trade. At its lower end, women monopolised the trade of second hand clothing and did all kinds of underpaid needlework, which allowed their better-off counterparts to keep their profitable businesses in mercery and millinery[117].

Eighteenth century economic dynamics had an effect on the artisanate, affecting its working conditions, economic prospects and gender relations. The spread of manufactures and proto-industrialisation eroded the artisan's status and economic prospects. Seasonality, low wages and the decline of master positions rendered artisans' positions insecure and reduced the gap between the artisanate and the manufacture worker. These conditions affected gender relations in two ways. On the one hand, fearing competition, the artisanate closed ranks and sought to exclude women from their trades, particularly from skilled work. Women were only tolerated in the dishonourable branches, in an effort to keep female salaries low, and in the typical female trades, from where there was no competition. On the other hand, as mastership became difficult to achieve, journeymen's possibilities of settling independently and marrying declined or were delayed. As a result, the artisanate turned increasingly to a bachelor culture based on male bonding and fraternity rather than on the mixing of

117 Hufton, *The Prospect before Her*, pp. 59-90 and Smith, *Changing Lives*, pp. 33-39.

the sexes. Accordingly, misogynist and violent attitudes towards women became particularly relevant among this section of the population[118].

The eighteenth century witnessed the contraction of opportunities for work in areas which had been traditionally a female preserve. As we have seen, the role of the midwife was progressively eroded by the rise of the male obstetrician. Within the medical field women lost ground to the emergence of professional medicine. During the early modern period, women's perceived closeness to nature, due to their reproductive functions, their alleged emotional nature and their prominent role in the rites of birth and death, led to a prominent role in healing at all levels of society. Women were healers and surgeons and gentlewomen's dispensed remedies as part of their paternalistic duties. The herbal lore of these women came to be questioned in the seventeenth century as scientific medicine displaced traditional cures at the upper end of society. This process reached its peak in the eighteenth century when female traditional medicine was derided on the grounds of its association with superstition and lack of formal training. Likewise, women were progressively excluded from brewing which turned from a home based, female dominated trade to a factory based, male dominated one[119].

Women found significant new openings in the labour market as the textile industry developed to take the lead in the industrialisation process. Textile industry flourished in the

---

[118] See Clark, *The Struggle for the Breeches.*

[119] Fletcher, *Gender, Sex and Subordination*, pp. 223-255.

northern cities such as Glasgow or Manchester, where a rural hinterland of cottage industry was coupled with an established artisanal tradition. Technological changes deeply affected the position of women in the textile industry. As we have seen, women were employed in large numbers in the putting out system by which an entrepreneur gave the raw material to rural women who were in charge of doing at home the first productive processes. However, the invention of the spinning jenny opened new possibilities for women, for it enabled the concentration of female workers whose low wages rendered the whole process highly profitable. The advent of the spinning mule changed this situation because it fostered factory work and, as it required strength and skill, men were preferred to do the spinning rather than women. Even so, women were much demanded and, together with children, were hired in large numbers to perform secondary tasks such as reeling, piecing and carding.

In spite of the low wages, women were drawn towards textile work for, on the one hand, their salary was a much needed complement to the subsistence wages of the head of the household and, on the other hand, textile industry offered women salaried and independent work. As Susan Kingsley Kent has remarked, 'from its very inception, factory work for women offered them low-level positions, low pay and few opportunities for advancement. But because it provided one of the few alternatives to domestic service, which often entailed humiliating and abusive conditions of work, women turned to it when and where it was available'. At the end of the eighteenth century, the proportion of women in the cotton industry was extremely high,

amounting to sixty-one per cent of the labour force in Scotland and to fifty per cent in Lancashire[120].

In her comparison between gender relations in the artisanate and those among textile workers, Anna Clark has argued that, among the latter, working conditions resulted in a less problematic relation with women. Working in a mixed environment and depending on the contribution of women and children, the labour system muted gender antagonism and fostered cooperation and assistance between husband and wife. However, even if collaboration and mixed company softened misogynistic attitudes, patriarchy was still at work among the textile workforce. Although their contribution was essential to the viability of the family, the subordinate role of women was accepted and they had little control of their wages which were collected and managed by the husband. As women became aware of the independence which could result from waged work, conflict and strife came to characterise gender relations among the plebeian classes. Masculine efforts to protect their patriarchal prerogatives and male anxieties about women usurping their power were opposed to women's awareness of their lack of control of their earnings, which were often spent in drink by the husband, female resentment for the little value their contribution to the family economy merited, and women's longing for a more companionate and egalitarian marriage. Popular literature reflected this 'struggle for the breeches'. Misogynist anti-marriage broadsheets celebrated

---

[120] Clark, *The Struggle for the Breeches* and Kingsley Kent, *Gender and Power*, pp. 137-140.

libertine bachelor culture and even justified marital violence. Women, in turn, expressed their bitterness against oppressive and abusive husbands in songs such as the following:

> I'll be no submissive wife
> No, not I – no, not I
> I'll not be a slave for life
> No, not I – no, not I[121].

Towards the end of the eighteenth century, prescriptive definitions of female roles, changing economic conditions and the progressive rise of a middle class ideology led to shifting perceptions on labouring women. Once considered productive contributors to family and national wealth, they were now seen as corrupted agents of moral and economic decay in need of reform. In the countryside, women's work belonged to a traditional set of practices, such as gleaning and collecting wood, currently criminalised as theft and trespass by the ongoing agricultural revolution. In the cities, urban growth and unstable employment conditions created slums and deteriorated the living conditions of the lower orders, for which women, accused of domestic mismanagement, were increasingly blamed. At the same time, gender roles established an essentially reproductive and private role for women, exemplified by the glorification of motherhood and companionate marriage. In an effort to separate themselves from the plebeian orders, middle class self-definitions delved into the separate spheres ideology to construe the middle class home as a sanctuary of morality and domesticity safeguarded by women

[121] Quoted in Clark, *The Struggle for the Breeches*, p. 69.

solely devoted to their families. By contrast, the poor were assimilated to filth, moral disorder, sexuality and idleness. Deserting the family home to work for pay and irresponsibly leaving their children to roam the streets, labouring women came to epitomise all the ills attributed to the poor by their upper and middle rank critics.

Women from the Middling Sort

The term 'middle classes' refers to a miscellaneous social group which saw its fortunes increase during the eighteenth century. Shopkeepers, manufacturers, better-off independent artisans, civil servants, professionals, lesser merchants, among others, formed the bulk of the middle class, as the term was understood in the eighteenth century as well as today. Being beneath the gentry and above the labouring classes, they depended neither on landed property nor on the precarious incomes afforded by the bourgeoning industrialisation process. However, at its upper and bottom ends, the middling orders overlapped their social inferiors and came close in their fortunes to the gentry. Even so, the middle classes were characterised by an awareness of their intermediate position. Although the desire of emulate aristocratic codes and modes of living was ever present among the middle classes, and landed wealth was often considered the ultimate goal which determined many middle class aspirations of aggrandisement, the middling orders also liked to stress their prudence and thrift, and distanced themselves from the corrupted and frivolous customs of the aristocracy, being conscious that extravagance and fashionable habits could easily lead to ruin and

debt. This singularising drive was particularly acute in relation to the working classes as the danger of descending in the social scale was ever present[122].

The sources of credit upon which the middle classes built their enterprises were insecure and uncertain. Given the precariousness of the financial structure of eighteenth century Britain, family support was essential to the success of their economic ventures. The extended family was the more reliable source of credit and considered to be morally responsible for the economic well-being of its members. Accordingly, marriage had a key role in procuring the much needed cash investment which would establish and buttress an individual's business. Not only women's dowries were used to this end, marriage also enabled individuals to extend the network of relatives who would be personally interested and economically involved in the success of their schemes and whose assets would be an important and more secure source of capital and loans. According to some authors, this system would in principle result in more affectionate and egalitarian marital relations, for women would be protected by the need of support from her relatives. However, this was not necessarily the case, as contemporary evidence shows that a considerable amount of violence and threat of violence against women was used in order to press reluctant in-laws into financial support[123].

---

122 Hunt, *The Middling Sort*, introduction.

123 Hunt, *The Middling Sort*, pp. 25-34, 151-162.

Women's contribution to the family economy started earlier in their lives. Girls were in charge of the household, did menial jobs, helped in the shop, and were often in charge of clerical tasks such as accountancy or letter writing. The status of the family as well as the nature of her assistance determined the level of training the girl would receive. Girls were generally taught numeracy, reading and writing skills; however, further education would be spared if their collaboration was needed. While middling class boys were placed in positions where they could gain the skills that would be useful in their future careers or sent to dissenting academies, only the better-off would afford the expense of formal female education, which was generally aimed at the acquisition of accomplishments which would rise the girl's value in the marriage market, thus increasing the chances of valuable family connections. As Margaret Hunt has pointedly argued, 'middling class girls' rearing was organised around the assumption that their individual needs and aspirations could be subordinated to the labour needs of the family group, and this pattern was supposed, in theory, to hold for the rest of their lives, whether or not they married'[124]. Girls could be indeed discouraged from marriage if the money for their dowry was needed by a male relative or if their assistance could not be spared. Values of love, self-sacrifice, duty and subordination were stressed at home and in advice books, shaping a female economy by which girls were to be recompensed in emotional rather than monetary terms. Women were endowed with few marketable skills and, although some could profit from learning a

[124] Hunt, *The Middling Sort*, p. 81.

mother's or an aunt's trade, the majority of them were only taught sewing, which would only perpetuate their subordinate position as the needle trades were low paid and afforded no status[125].

Nevertheless, in reality, women were aware that the possession of economic resources was essential. While, being conscious of the difficulties and punishments which lay in the way of those who went against the grain, mothers wished their daughters to exceed in a traditional female role, women relatives, aware of female vulnerability, often bequeathed money for the separate use of their younger relations. In spite of the difficulty of attaining the necessary capital to settle independently, some middle class women were successful in pursuing a trade different from their husbands'. There is evidence of women grouping together to compensate for lack of enough capital of their own. Women had a significant presence as shopkeepers, often specialising in products, such as china, glass or tea, increasingly demanded by the consumer-oriented eighteenth century economy. The commercial revolution also opened opportunities for women in newspaper publishing, mantua making and millinery. They accepted boarders, opened pawnbrokers' shops, clothes-making establishments and household furnishing shops. The progressive enlargement of opportunities for relatively safe investments benefited some middling women who lived on dividends. After the husband's death, the widow could sometimes continue the business herself,

[125] Hunt, *The Middling Sort*.

especially when she had no sons or if they were still incapable of being fully in charge[126].

Many women profited from the expansion of girls' schooling and earned their living by opening boarding or day schools, taking pupils or working as governesses. Most of these women had studied at a private school and thus had some experience on the business. However, the importance of women's rise as teachers was not only economic. In teaching, women found a job which could secure their respectability and give a sense of usefulness and purpose in life. When writing to a schoolmistress friend, Mary Wollstonecraft, who had taken up the job in her early years and even wrote on the subject, was keen on emphasising the personal rewards teaching afforded,

> your employment tho' a troublesome one, is very necessary, and you have the opportunity of doing much good, by instilling good principles into the young and the ignorant, and at the close of life you'll have the pleasure to think that you have not lived in vain, and, believe me, this reflection is worth a life of care[127]

Even if recent research has shown that the number of women living alone and being self-supportive was higher than what had been traditionally assumed, women's ventures, particularly married women's, were unstable and fraught with difficulties. Although there were supportive husbands, most of them considered their wives' business as their own, exerting pressure to keep the benefits, depriving them of capital if needed elsewhere, or

[126] Hunt, *The Middling Sort*, pp. 125-147.

[127] Skedd, 'Women Teachers and the Expansion of Girls' Schooling', p. 116.

sacrificing their wives' assets in case of debt or financial need. Not only husbands but also society in general cared little about the legal status of *feme sole* that some women had – which gave them the right to engage on business separately and independently from their husbands – and thus, even after having survived the depredations of their husbands, women's business could be plagued and destroyed by their husbands' unpaid creditors. Accordingly, married women's commercial ventures were always insecure, dependent on other's will and contingent[128].

GENTLEWOMEN

The genteel section of society was formed by the lesser gentry, rich commercial families and better-off clerics, lawyers and doctors among the professionals, whose status was upheld by their having real property or by being the younger sons of prosperous landowners. Such an amalgam of economic interests was held together by their position as the local elite of British counties and towns as well as by cultural homogeneity. They shared a common education, tastes and cultural pursuits. They were united by income and business ventures, and served together on local commissions. Most importantly, they were linked by common sociability and by its attendant values of politeness and sensibility. Turning to literature, we can examine the social and mental landscape of this prominent yet somewhat elusive section of the population in the novels of Jane Austen which accurately depicted genteel values,

[128] Hunt, *The Middling Sort*, pp. 125-147.

aspirations and sociability at the beginning of the nineteenth century[129].

In less tangible terms, the genteel orders liked to define themselves as 'polite', 'genteel', 'civil', 'well-bred' and 'polished' thus emphasising the cultural common ground which they shared and which united them above financial considerations or noble status. Even if they rejected the frivolous and fashion-driven customs of the aristocracy, ambivalence marked their relations to the nobility, which was the upper social echelon to which many aspired. However, at the same time, aristocratic values were thought to betray the sensible and more rational rewards genteel status was believed to have. As it is recurrently hinted in Jane Austen's novels, the cohesion of the gentility was sometimes strained by the different consideration in which landed and commercial wealth were held, at a time in which civil republican ideals still bestowed a greater share of civic virtue and honour on real property[130].

Providing an heir to the family fortune was one of the most important duties for the women of this section of society, who during their fertile years, as we have seen, devoted a significant share of their energies and time to childrearing and the first education of their children. However, gentlewomen were in charge of many other duties which ensured substantially not only the

---

[129] See Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter*, pp. 13-39 and Austen, *Mansfield Park*, Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*, Austen, *Emma*, Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*.

[130] See Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter*, pp. 13-39 and Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*.

family well-being but also its belonging to the exclusive genteel status.

Housekeeping fell entirely under the care of gentlewomen. Elite housekeeping encompassed many skills, such as the government of the servants, the ordering and cleaning of the physical household, the production of clothes and household goods, provisioning and the making and dispensing of medicine. All of these duties were to be carried out discreetly; women should never make a fuss of their domestic responsibilities and household order was chiefly valued by the invisibility of the hand which commanded it. However, this general rule did not mean that the importance of all these tasks went ignored. Gentlemen valued highly good housekeeping and considered it an important requirement on a bride-to-be. While single and when no kinswomen were available to fulfil the role of mistress of the house, gentlemen complained bitterly on the strain which managing the household represented and speeded the process of finding a wife in order to be relieved of the burden[131].

The management of the servants was among the main tasks which housekeeping included. Genteel households had a number of servants which varied between five and ten, thus not allowing the existence of an upper echelon of servants in charge of regulating the service. In addition, giving the poor rewards and the considerable demands and humiliations of service, servants soon abandoned their positions and new ones had to be continually recruited. This fact also accounts for the lack of an executive

[131] Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter*, pp. 127-161.

division of upper servants who managed the lower ranks. As the mistress of the household had no intermediaries and could barely delegate, she had to see personally that everything was done according to genteel standards and to her taste. Although there is little record about the actual division of work between the service and the mistress of the house, it is fair to suppose that she was hardly engaged in any back breaking toil. Even so, in order to ascertain that the work was performed properly, gentlewomen had to know how to do these tasks themselves. They should know how to sew, clean a piece of silver, churn good butter or harvest ripe vegetables.

We should not underestimate the energy and effort which regulating the service required nor the psychological strain which dealing with servants entailed. A balance had to be found between excessive tolerance and over-correction. As they grew older, gentlewomen tended to develop attachments, particularly with female servants, which however did not dissolve the hierarchy of their respective positions or lessen significantly the harsh working conditions which service involved. Thus, women often felt deserted and deceived when a favourite maid left the household in search of better prospects[132].

The good order of the household required high standards of cleanliness and a constant inspection and cataloguing of household goods, to ensure its conservation and neatness in an unrelenting fight against leaking roofs and inefficient chimneys. In spite of the rise of commercialisation, the provision of household linen

---

[132] Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter*, pp. 127-161.

depended chiefly on self-provisioning and demanded constant attention and supervision of needle work, which together with general neatness and material possessions accounted for much of the outward display of politeness and gentility.

Finally, gentlewomen were head provisioners and guardians of food supplies. They dealt with tenant farmers, followed the rhythms of the farming year and supervised the livestock. They made conserves, pickles, and other processed food, while storing and inventorying purchased commodities such as sugar, salt or wine. Even if they did not cook, they were directly involved in the elaboration of everyday meals, checking that cooking reached genteel standards[133].

As we have seen, genteel status depended much on a good ordered household and thus, housekeeping was valued not only by men as one of the main assets to be gained from a judicious marriage but also by women. After marriage, women were eager to take the reins of the household and later on they were reluctant to pass on its management to a daughter in law. They found in housekeeping a source of authority, self-satisfaction, reputation and pride and thus indignantly resented husband encroachments upon what was considered not only their duty but also their pride. Victorian judges backed these claims and supported women who found themselves deprived from their natural position as mistress of their husband's house[134].

---

133 Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter*, pp. 127-161.

134 Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter*, pp. 127-161.

Cleanliness, good household order and a regulated service were surely marks of a gentility which found its most outward and richest expression in material possessions. A carefully arranged display of furniture, silver, porcelain, silk as well as a well-provisioned larder were valued as signs of a polite living. Objects announced wealth and a cultivated taste, emphasised the privileges of genteel status and allowed gentlemen and gentlewomen to distance themselves both from the vulgarity of the common people and from the ultrafashionable and capricious nobility. Material culture was even considered the expression of one's character as it happened with dress[135].

Gentlewomen's diaries and letters suggest that material objects were invested with powerful emotional meanings. Delicate china, discreet yet dignified dress or a well-provisioned table had a reassuring function, confirming genteel status and giving proof of a privileged social position. Well-chosen and well-maintained possessions testified to good management, in the eyes of visitors and strangers, and, on a personal level, gratified self-esteem. Possessions might act as extensions of the self, they were treasured as tokens of affection or material proofs of love and consideration. They were also related to continuity and to the safe transmission of inheritance. Large and expensive items, in their durability, comforted many women by recalling their contribution as safe keepers of a line which would survive beyond their individual lives[136].

---

135 Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter*, pp. 161-195.

136 Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter*, pp. 161-195.

Consumption was chiefly conducted by women and has been traditionally associated with vanity, pleasure and frivolous pursuits. However, some aspects of domestic consumption were considered to be a male responsibility. Items related to business and economic activities fell to men as well as high status provisions such as snuff, wine and game. It is quite likely that men retained the ultimate sanction over extraordinary purchases requiring the outlay of considerable capital. Even so it was women who were principally identified with spending in the eighteenth century imagination, when the management of consumption was regarded a proper feminine concern[137].

Gentlewomen were responsible for buying various households appurtenances and necessaries. Everyday consumption, such as provisions and groceries, was performed periodically in the small circle of the parish and neighbourly towns while expensive items such as furniture were often bought in London. Dress and linen required more thought; newspapers were read to be informed on the latest fashions and friends were consulted about the propriety of the newest sartorial trends and on the necessity of reconciling fashion with durability, versatility and the characteristics of each individual, such as age and physical features. Friends and relatives were also mobilised when buying furniture and tableware. Individual tastes were discussed as well as the latest designs and patterns, the necessity of the purchase and the suitability of particular items. Consumption, thus, figured prominently in gentlewomen's correspondence and contributed

137 Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter*, pp. 161-195.

significantly to sustain the networks of sociability which women knitted carefully with friends and relatives and which represented an important emotional input and the source of many psychological and material rewards[138].

Correspondence buttressed the networks of sociability which figured prominently among gentlewomen's duties and responsibilities. Gentlewomen helped substantially to maintain the relationships and acquaintances which integrated the family within the circle of the well-bred, from which pleasure and social, economic and political benefits were drawn. We have already seen the important role of genteel sociability in the politics of marriage. Connections forged and maintained by women were productive of joint business ventures and professional opportunities for younger sons and relatives. As Olwen Hufton has argued, 'England's local politics were based on ties fostered among the local landowners and the lady of the house was at the nexus of the business of hospitality as well as that of planning for the next generation'[139].

Although the eighteenth century witnessed the contraction of the all inclusive hospitality which characterised the elite household during the previous centuries, the large country house of the gentry remained a centre of influence and patronage, where the family displayed its power and magnanimity to his locality. The social functions of the genteel household were fostered by the emergence of the discourse of politeness and sensibility which in addition upheld the prominent role of women in sociability. The

---

[138] Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter*, pp. 161-195.

[139] Hufton, *The Prospect before Her*, p. 146.

vocabulary of sensibility and politeness emphasised the refining influence of women and placed them at the core of a sociability which was considered essential for the cohesion of the group and the development of the individual. Polite standards demanded an utmost control of outward expressions of the self, which were seen as the reflection of an inner civility. Self control should be coupled with a gentle demeanour, a controlled deportment and proper decorum. These traits, initially advocated for men, were the same that gentlewomen were to posses if they were to carry out their refining role properly. Gentlewomen should be distinguished by an air of dignified ease, graceful control and by a consciousness of social distinctions and claims of status. Even if female and male manners shared a similar emphasis on propriety and sympathy, women were also required to stick to the exclusive feminine code which valued chastity and modesty above all[140].

Polite standards certainly limited traditional sociability and circumscribed it to the circle of the civil and well-bred. Accessible sociability was restricted to local festivities and to rent days, when the local tenants went to the household to pay their due. Certain areas of the house and rooms as well as meals were reserved for inclusive sociability. Dependants were entertained in the 'common' parts of the house such as the servants' hall and the kitchen. Tea parties were socially inclusive and were often held to interact socially with the wives of the tenants or to sort out transactions with mantua-makers, shopkeepers or seamstresses. While casual callers and traders were served with the common tea set in the

[140] Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter*, pp. 195-225.

parlour or dining room, polite guests were entertained in the same rooms decked out in the best linen, china and silverware[141].

Similarly, although the vocabulary of politeness advocated a mixed sociability between the sexes, there were particular occasions in which social interaction was divided along gender lines. Breakfast gathered males of an equal social standing while the gentlewoman's bedroom was the place for exclusive female gatherings. By contrast, dinners were the event most likely to integrate both sexes, in which polite entertainment such as music and cards took place for the benefit of genteel acquaintances and family[142].

Regular meetings, dinners and parties were supplemented by the practice of sending compliments. Compliments were brief messages to enquire after health and journeys, to decline invitations, to offer congratulations and condolences and to express gratitude for hospitality. They required some acknowledgement in return. A large acquaintance could be maintained with occasional visits and the ordinary exchange of compliments via servants and tradespleople[143].

The household was not the only place in which women commanded their allegedly beneficial influence through sociability. The eighteenth century witnessed an expansion of venues in which the 'well-bred' could meet and mix together, as well as the sexes, for polite sociability in the eighteenth century was first and

---

141 Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter*, pp. 195-225.

142 Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter*, pp. 195-225.

143 Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter*, pp. 195-225.

foremost heterosocial. Women, thus, figured prominently in all sorts of public entertainment and social intercourse as it is proved not only by the existing records of the time but also by the moralists' insistence on female decorum and propriety in public. Ladies and women of a high social standing (which included the upper sections of the middle classes) enjoyed witnessing the royal family whether in public festivities such as those which celebrated the birthday of the monarch or the anniversary of his accession, or attending the prayer at the Chapel Royal. Significantly, the famous London season coincided with the period in which the royal family resided at court[144].

The opera satisfied the eighteenth century taste for music as well as the wish to see the royalty and the higher echelons of the aristocracy. Enjoyment of the spectacle and gossip about the members of the elite were smoothly mingled in the theatre, where ladies could boast their social position, by paying for the more exclusive seats, and their taste, by donning their best attires. However, the fashionable promenades and pleasure gardens were undoubtedly the place to see and to be seen. The taste of English women for physical exercise was reconciled with their expansive sociability in the number of gardens and walks which were built not only in London but also in most provincial towns. The female invasion of a public sphere of social intercourse and entertainment took swiftly to the provincial cities which soon in the century had their own winter season with attendant theatrical performances and balls, town walks and assembly rooms. The assembly was

144 Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter*, pp. 225-285.

undoubtedly the more 'genteel' of all these forms of sociability. An assembly was an evening gathering, accommodating various forms of entertainment such as tea, cards, dancing and, above all, talk. Not only it was conceived by and for the gentility, it was also deeply associated with female entertainment. Accordingly, when it derived to ridottos and masquerades, many voices spoke against these diversions in which the mask and the disguise allowed the secrecy of identities and, thus, they feared, licentiousness and social and sexual confusion[145].

Women participated of the associative rage which characterised the eighteenth century. They contributed and managed charities and self help associations, while the boldest joined clubs devoted to literature, antiquarian and scientific pursuits and even formed their own debating societies. In a more informal way, women went to the coffee-houses were a variety of topics were discussed and participated in all these informal networks which had been considered an essential part of the public sphere as defined by Habermas[146].

THE ENLARGEMENT OF THE FEMININE SPHERE

Much has been said and debated on the classic division between public and private and its association with male and female spheres. Eighteenth century British women certainly challenged a clear-cut division between both spheres by

[145] Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter*, pp. 225-285.

[146] Mary Thale, 'Women in London Debating Societies', *Gender and History*, 7, (1995), pp. 5-24.

participating largely in diverse public venues and forms of entertainment, as we have seen, and by becoming prime actors in a polite, mixed sociability, a leading role which was advocated by many enlightened authors. As Amanda Vickery has suggested, 'self-conscious domesticity and effective housekeeping did not automatically result in female seclusion'[147]. The feminine assault on the public sphere through venues of polite entertainment was clearly consistent with current discourses of femininity, even if feminine sociability could easily stretch current notions of decorum and modesty. Women also engaged in the public sphere in ways which aroused sanction and were soon drastically condemned. Without leading a revolution, as their French counterparts did, British women were ready to take the political banner whether marching openly – and indecently – in the streets or by taking advantage of the space allowed by Christian-inspired movements of reform and charity.

Aristocratic women were leading, though often covert, political actors of their time. Not all aristocratic women were involved in politics. Several factors fostered women's active participation such as the existence of a family tradition of female activity or, obviously, individual character and taste. Even so, at this level, we should not consider female political involvement as a matter of principles or ideological commitment; it rather sprung from the necessity of supporting the family prestige and success, a role not altogether inconsistent with the requirements of femininity among the peerage. Although women could not stand

147 Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter*, p. 290.

as candidates or win a seat in Parliament, there was much to be done in support of a family member or the family's faction, generally in an informal way. Women often presided over social politics, managing people and social activities with a political end in mind. They forged valuable connections through various forms of sociability and sustained the family's political credit through patronage, hospitality, personal displays at local events and carefully planned charity. They were also active at canvassing and added lustre to political claims by taking part in processions and parades, and attending meetings where the proverbial feminine conviviality and sensibility could be used to the candidate's advantage. At the higher levels of female political involvement stood a handful of experienced and strong minded matriarchs who managed and directed campaigns, and controlled family interests[148].

However, whatever high status a woman could boast, female involvement in high politics had its limits, as proved by the case of Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire. Her active role canvassing in support of Charles Fox led to scandal and to her relinquishing her involvement in politics. Support for a non relative, thus evincing political ideas of her own, and a too freely mingling with the lower sections of the population sealed her fall from a respectable lady to

[148] See Linda Colley, *Britons. Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (New Haven & London, 1992), Elaine Chalus, "That Epidemical Madness': Women and Electoral Politics in the Late Eighteenth Century', in Hannah Barker and Elaine Chalus (eds.), *Gender in Eighteenth Century England. Roles, Representations and Responsibilities* (London & New York, 1997), pp. 151-178 and Amanda Foreman, 'A Politician's Politician: Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire and the Whig Party', in Hannah Barker and Elaine Chalus (eds.), *Gender in Eighteenth Century England. Roles, Representations and Responsibilities* (London & New York, 1997), pp. 179-205.

the subject of harsh criticisms which questioned both her virtue and femininity[149].

Lower down the social scale, women were also mobilised by politics. As we will see in the next chapter, popular politics revolved in the eighteenth century around issues of empire, defence of civic liberties and national pride, and were spurred above all by middle class claims to patriotism and citizenship. Women assumed these demands and were imbued with patriotic spirit, making public their support for popular movements such as the Wilkite campaigns, the Gordon Riots and those arising from the American War. As Susan Kinsgley Kent has emphasised, 'women marched, demonstrated, protested and rioted; they were mobilized by propagandists and prosecuted for sedition'[150]. They read and printed political pamphlets and bought and sold objects of political propaganda such as cockades, scarves and prints. Although formally excluded from political associations, they contributed with their time and money to the patriotic associations which mushroomed from the 1750's[151].

However, women could have a significant political role in ways more consistent with prevalent notions of femininity. Women participated actively in anti-slavery movements, initiatives for the reform of the poor and moralising schemes in ways plainly consistent with current associations between women, benevolence,

---

149 Foreman, 'A Politician's Politician'.

150 Kingsley Kent, *Gender and Power*, p. 103.

151 See Colley, *Britons*, Kingsley Kent, *Gender and Power*, pp. 101-126 and Kathleen Wilson, *The Sense of the People. Politics, Culture and Imperialism in England, 1715-1785* (New York, 1995).

virtue and religiosity. Women of different ideological ascriptions campaigned for the improvement and enlargement of female education, from the conservative and deeply religious Hannah More and the Bluestockings to the republican Catherine Macaulay and the radical Mary Wollstonecraft. Their different characters and ideological stances determined varied visions on female education. While Macaulay and Wollstonecraft insisted on the individual benefits of a proper education and the latter used the topic to argue for equality and ground political claims, More considered that education was needed only to better perform the traditional female role as mothers and wives[152].

The steady and spectacular rise of female literacy contributed to the effervescence of women's participation in public campaigns. Female literacy rose from one per cent in 1500 to twenty five per cent in 1740 and then to forty per cent by 1750. The main part of this increase took place among urban and middle class women. Even so, studies made on different sections of the female population evince that direct need was not necessarily the only spur that drove women to literacy. Among the domestic service, the rates of literacy were of 40% while the needle trades reached a 70%. Obviously, shopkeepers, midwives and schoolteachers registered the highest rates (between 80% and 100%). Religious ascription also determined variations in literacy. Quaker and Methodists registered the higher rates of female literacy. In any case, we should not overrate the extent of these newly acquired

---

[152] Kingsley Kent, *Gender and Power*, pp. 108-110 and Rogers, *Feminism in Eighteenth Century England.*

skills. As a rule, most women were taught reading and writing in order to contribute to parental or marital advancement and not to their own; accordingly, they were rarely encouraged to advance beyond a certain point in their studies[153].

Even so, women became rapidly an important section of the reading public and writers and editors sought to gratify their taste. It is well known that authors such as Addison and Hume sought regularly feminine advice. Magazines designed for women appeared, such as the *Female Spectator* or the *Lady's Magazine* (which ran for seventy years). Some authors have even related the fashion for the novel of sensibility to the rise of a feminine readership.

Reading and writing was the source of many pleasures for women. They could maintain and develop enriching personal connections with relatives and friends through regular and intimate correspondence. Literacy opened for many a path towards economic and personal independence through teaching and writing. Women took the pen in great numbers in the eighteenth century, most of them dealing with private matters, and leaving for us a historical record of their lives and thoughts. For others, writing and reading led to economic independence through teaching or writing novels. Such was the case of Mary Wollstonecraft, whose education allowed her to devote her life, first to teaching and then to polemical writing.

Female writing reached a peak unknown in previous periods. Until the eighteenth century few women, chiefly from the

---

153 Hufton, *The Prospect before Her*, pp. 419-458 and Hunt, *The Middling Sort*, pp. 84-90.

aristocracy, dared to publish and when they did, wrote mainly devotional works, child care manuals or books on female subjects such as cookery or herbal lore. The eighteenth century witnessed a widening of the social spectrum of the women writer and an enlargement the genres taken up by women, with the emergence of the female novelist. The vogue of sensibility in literature put women at the centre of attention, attracting female readers and encouraging women to take the pen. Sensibility reconciled traditional female virtues such as forbearance and sensitivity with the classical traits of the hero such as courage and spirit. As Katharine M. Rogers has remarked, 'in a world where their [women's] preferences and sensibilities were habitually disregarded, it was gratifying to see 'sensibility' exalted as an essential virtue for women and men'[154]. Dealing with romantic attachments and delving into the emotions of the heart, these novels were undoubtedly appealing for women. By exploring the anxieties arising from courtship and love, women recalled the period when they had a choice and were courted for their consent. Through fiction, women could explore issues pertaining directly to their lives and selves such as women's autonomy, roles and status, the power of men, sexual danger and the interaction of gender roles and moral and social values.

In addition, the novel could be the vehicle through which incipient feminist demands were articulated and expressed. In her novels, Mary Hays demanded female intellectual development and claimed for a better education for women while Mary

[154] Rogers, *Feminism in Eighteenth Century England*, p. 149.

Wollstonecraft denounced the oppressive nature of marriage and the double standard inherent to it. Far from the radicalism of Mary Wollstonecraft, Hannah More was able to earn a comfortable living by the pen, through treatises on education, devotional books and even plays. The Bluestocking circle, though moderate in their views about women's situation, vindicated for women an intellectual role in society which they performed by their translations, works of scholarship and learned discussions[155].

Even if the eighteenth century witnessed the lessening of prejudices against the female author, women who took the pen had to face numerous obstacles. There were still harsh criticisms against learned women who were accused of vanity, pedantry and of forsaking the virtues of femininity. Material conditions hindered women's literary pursuits. They had to deal with household worries and family duties, devoting to writing what little time they had left after they had fulfilled their feminine obligations. Female literary works were judged in a patronising light, which discouraged ambition and fostered literary conventionalism in order to escape from criticism. It seems that women authors felt acutely the pressure; they justified their works in the preface or published them anonymously, even allowing the father or some fatherly figure to censure and correct their work. Women writers' preference for the novel soon led to its cataloguing as an inferior genre, less worthy than essays, theatre or poetry[156].

---

155 Hufton, *The Prospect before Her*, pp. 419-458 and Rogers, *Feminism in Eighteenth Century England.*

156 Rogers, *Feminism in Eighteenth Century England*, pp. 25-53.

Religion had traditionally been important in women's lives and activities. Going to the church on Sundays represented an essential part of women's public outings and female sociability. Female charity initiatives were praised by prescriptive literature, which blended female virtues with an alleged female tendency towards religion and devoutness. However it was through new forms of piety such as Methodism that religion emerged as a powerful outlet for women's self-expression, allowing them an increasing public role. John Wesley founded Methodism in an attempt to renew Christian faith and attract the plebeian sections of the population, which were disenchanted with the established Church of England. The nascent working classes and urban middle classes felt soon the appeals of Methodism, which catered for the lower sections of society by rejecting Calvinist predestination and preaching in the streets and open fields. Methodists organised themselves in small groups, provided believers with an alternative to absent or disrupted families and with support and help in periods of need. The growing success of Methodism inspired other dissenting communities and fostered what has been called an 'evangelical revival' in the last decades of the eighteenth century.

Plebeian women figured prominently among the followers of Methodism, whose attractions for women were many. Following the tenets of sensibility, Methodist preachers advocated a softer and gentler masculinity, contrary to the unruly customs of plebeian men and much to the liking of plebeian women. Methodism promoted order, family responsibility and self-control and preached against drunkenness, gambling, and marital violence, just the problems that many women had to face daily. In addition,

Methodist women were encouraged to form sisterhoods and develop networks where they often found support and comfort from poor living conditions and unhappy marriages. Women could also perform unconventional roles, as Methodism allowed women to preach in public. However subversive this might seem, Methodist ideas regarding gender roles were hardly revolutionary. The prominent role conceded to women derived from an emphasis on individual spirituality rather than from an assertion of female equality or rights. Thus, as Methodism grew, reaching the better-off sections of the population, and becoming institutionalised, it forsook female preaching. Methodism became respectable, moulding itself to middle class ethos, pruning radicalism, and promoting female modesty and domesticity, leaving for women charitable works as the only respectable public venture.

The conservative turn which Methodism took from the 1790's onwards was a common trend in British society. Debates about gender roles and the presence of women in the public arena were already a source of anxieties, which grew more and more acute as the events of the French Revolution unfolded. The French Revolution brought about a tide of conservativism in all fields of British public life but affected particularly the way in which British people conceived of gender roles. Gender played a key role in the responses to the French revolutionary events from the beginning. Quite rightly, Mary Wollstonecraft saw in the revolution an unprecedented opportunity for female equality and rights. For his part, her opponent, Edmund Burke, ascribed women a major role in his analysis of the revolutionary process.

Among the many evils which the Revolution represented, one of the greatest was the overturning of the natural gender order. Women swarmed in the streets, and like the Furies, forsaking both modesty and social order, attacked the king and the aristocracy. Men, renouncing all chivalric spirit and reverential respect, killed the queen. This was a complete subversion of the social, political, gender, natural order which must not be imitated in Britain[157].

While the reaction against British radicalism took place, women faced a contraction of their sphere and roles through increasingly restrictive definitions of femininity[158]. Gender roles were buttressed, definitions of femininity and masculinity were hardened in a way in which their characteristics appeared to be mutually exclusive, and the separate sphere ideology was strengthened in an attempt to remove any instability and porosity between the private and domestic realm of women and the public world of men. Accordingly, in the political field, the gender identity of the political subject was contracted, and the identification between politics and masculinity intensified. Quite significantly, in these years the prestige of Mary Wollstonecraft waned amidst charges of immorality, while the decent and pious Hannah More saw her fame rise to new heights.

---

157 On the French Revolution, see Olwen H. Hufton, *Women and the Limits of Citizenship in the French Revolution* (Toronto, 1989), Lynn Hunt, *Politics, Culture and Class in the French Revolution* (Berkeley & Los Angeles, 1984), Lynn Hunt, *The Family Romance of the French Revolution* (London, 1992) and Dorinda Outram, *The Body and the French Revolution. Sex, Class and Political Culture* (New Haven & London, 1989).

158 See Dror Wahrman, '*Percy*'s Prologue: From Gender Play to Gender Panic in Eighteenth-Century England', *Past and Present*, 159, (1998), pp. 113-160.

2

Nation, Province and National Identity

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, Britain was far from being a united nation. Wales and England had retained some of their peculiarities and distinctiveness in spite of the Act of Union which in 1536 joined both kingdoms. Similarly, the Treaty of Union between England and Scotland was aimed at drawing together two parts of the British Isles which, in fact, differed sharply from each other. Thus, even if Scottish political institutions were obliterated in 1707, Scotland maintained a character of its own. It kept its distinctive legal and religious systems, and had its own language and cultural traditions. Economically, it was a much poorer region still prone to famines and agricultural crisis, which lacked its neighbour's commercial

strength. Much of her territory and population was bound by the feudal-like ties of the Highland system of land possession, clan organisation and personal loyalties. All of this encouraged a sense that Scotland was one step behind England in the path towards modernity, restrained by economic backwardness, widespread rusticity and an attachment to a distinctive but gloomy tradition.

However, as Linda Colley has pointed out, 'attachment to Wales, to Scotland and even to England was always complicated by the fact that these three countries were neither united themselves nor distinct from each other'[1]. Scotland was far from being homogeneous or possessed by a strong sense of identity. The urban English-speaking Lowlanders felt themselves closer to their English neighbours than to the inhabitants of the rural and isolated Highlands. Religious divisions between Presbyterians and Episcopalians often resulted in confrontation and the political divide between those who backed a Jacobite restoration and those loyal to the Hanoverian dynasty persisted until mid-century. In addition, a sense of distinctive identity was rarely expressed and lacked widespread popularity. Quite on the contrary, many Scots deemed the Treaty of the Union essential for Scotland's progress.

In spite of the outbursts of hostility and derision towards the Scots fostered by the Treaty of the Union, England was also cut across by strong regional attachments and by religious difference. Long distance travelling was still uncommon in this period and different geographic and economic characteristics determined the

---

[1] Linda Colley, *Britons. Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (New Haven & London, 1992), p. 14.

persistence of fierce localisms. People's strongest loyalties were still due to town, village and family.

Nevertheless, the eighteenth century witnessed a process of redefinition of national identity. Englishness became a less vague notion as calls for the defence of English identity were incorporated into the political discourse and infused across a wider public. Yet, the incorporation of Scotland and the rise of the island as an imperial and economic power marked the construction and success of a more inclusive notion of nationhood, that of being British. In terms of national identity, thus, the eighteenth century was marked by both processes: the invigoration of a sense of English pride and the formation and increasing pervasiveness of the notion of Britishness.

Among both dynamics, the latter will be a more complex and lengthy development. Although Britain as a political entity was institutionalised in 1707, its abstract enactment as an emotional bond and a primary element of self-definition took longer to root. Regional diversity, attachment to Scotland and Wales and the peculiarities of each realm surely complicated the consolidation and popularity of the idea of a joined identity.

England had a more developed and precocious sense of national unity, due in part to the existence of a more homogeneous and solid state apparatus, which was supported by a strong royal authority and expanded over regional differences through a unified legal system, the involvement of local elites on administrative tasks, a single dominant language and a centralized economy. London had an important role in smoothing local peculiarities. It was the main point of reference in cultural terms, whose fashions

were imitated throughout the country. Being the centre of politics, commerce, and finance, it attracted a large amount of the population, which visited London temporarily or to dwell permanently. Urban growth, the improvement of transport and communication networks, together with the expansion of the press and the rise of literacy levels also contributed to erode localisms. Constant warfare against France fostered cohesion and as well as a sense of religious unity in Protestantism, in spite of the multiplicity of sects, religious factions and divisions[2].

However, a more intense sense of English identity was not only the by-product of early and successful processes of state building and modernisation. It was also the result of a mystification of England's success in becoming a military and economic great power during the eighteenth century. The achievements witnessed during the first decades of the century encouraged a sense of pride in being English that was mixed with important doses of self-satisfaction and chauvinism. In addition, the new constitutional order born after the Glorious Revolution was upheld through a celebration of the political order which rejoiced in the Parliamentary system and political rights, identifying political liberty with English uniqueness. Promoting a proud and embattled Englishness was often sought in order to sustain England's constant involvement in the struggles for markets and international supremacy. Thus, as Linda Colley has argued, Englishness (and later on Britishness) was frequently defined

---

[2] See Colley, *Britons* and Kathleen Wilson, *The Sense of the People. Politics, Culture and Imperialism in England, 1715-1785* (New York, 1995).

through confrontation with the 'other', allowing a disunited nation to overcome its internal differences and celebrate its distinctiveness and superiority. In this fashion, England was favourably compared with its European opponents; English people enjoyed the liberties of constitutionalism which were opposed to the oppression suffered by its French and Spanish enemies. Moreover, England was often identified with Israel as the land chosen by God because it had endured similar trials and toils in the defence of true religion. Catholics were equated to the Babylonians since they shared the same determination to pursue the righteous, overthrow their beliefs and enslave them[3].

Politics and religion were often conflated. Protestantism was the safeguard of traditional English rights which would disappear under the Catholic taste for authority and popish despotism. The Hanoverian order made good use of this association and represented itself both as the restoration of the ancient constitution and as the defence of Protestantism in front of the Catholic Stuarts. The success of the Jacobite cause could only bring to an end English privileged rights and religion as proved by the ties between the Stuarts, and France and Rome[4].

English people would also define themselves against the racial 'other' brought closer by the imperial expansion. They were civilised and pious in contrast to the pagan savagery of the Native

---

[3] See Colley, *Britons*. On the historical vicissitudes of eighteenth century Britain, see Wilfrid Prest, *Albion Ascendant. English History, 1660-1815* (New York, 1998) and Paul Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People. England, 1727-1783* (Oxford, 1989).

[4] See Colley, *Britons* and Wilson, *The Sense of the People.*

Americans or the infidel despotism of the Orient. In addition, the 'other' within often acted as a powerful device for reassurance of English identity and superiority, as the unremitting anti-Scottish feelings that characterised most of the century point out. English people came to define themselves as polite and free in front of stereotypes such as the Scottish barbarous Highlander or the cunning and haughty Jacobite[5].

These attitudes infused the aftermath of the Treaty of the Union and hindered the acceptance of Scotland as an equal partner. As Linda Colley remarked, recalling the words of Daniel Defoe, the Act of 1707 was 'very much a union of policy (…) not a union of affection'[6]. The Scots were seen by many Englishmen as poor relations, self-minded individuals willing to enter the Union only to rapaciously profit from English prosperity and with nothing to offer in exchange except for Jacobite sympathies and a burden to the national economy. This view was concisely expressed in 1746 by a Whig public figure who wrote that 'Scotland… is certainly the sink of the earth'[7]. Even supporters of the union, such as Daniel Defoe, adopted a patronising attitude in his description of Scotland. He observed that, although Scots had recently become 'less wild and barbarous', 'they have more generally a disposition to play the knave than the English"[8]. These reservations regarding the incorporation of Scotland were,

---

[5] See Colley, *Britons* and Wilson, *The Sense of the People.*

[6] Colley, *Britons*, p. 12.

[7] Quoted in Colley, *Britons*, p. 13.

[8] Quoted in Prest, *Albion Ascendant*, pp. 114 and 115.

however, part of an English tendency to view alien people (both within and without Britain) with hostility or condescension. They were part of a common set of images that were applied indiscriminately to barbarous colonial subjects and to the peoples of the less civilised fringes of the British islands. Accordingly, Irishmen and Welshmen were often described in the same manner: 'whether Irishmen or Pequots, Scots or Iroquois, they were enemies, they were ignorant and animal-like'[9].

As the century progressed, Britain took a more solid form thus enabling a more solid and widespread identification. Yet, notions of Britishness were closely related to the fortunes of the idea of Englishness. Both notions were engaged in a complex relationship in which their boundaries were normally blurred and the defining elements of each were often interchangeable. Most research on the topic has emphasised the key importance of definitions of Englishness as the main material upon which the notion of Britishness was elaborated, extended to the population and increasingly accepted and interiorised. This approach relates closely the processes of state building and identity formation, considering the latter the product of a centrifuge movement through which the culture and language of England were exported to the provinces where they were implanted and eagerly imitated. These English-based patterns would eventually become the dominant core of the notion of Britain in a process reflected and symbolised by the leading role of London.

---

[9] Bernard Bailyn and Philip D. Morgan (eds.), *Strangers within the Realm. Cultural Margins of the First British Empire* (Chapel Hill & London, 1991), p. 18.

According to this line of explanation, commercial success and empire building were crucial to the elaboration of eighteenth ideas of English identity and, in turn, to the emergence of an English-based notion of Britain. The two processes were regarded as hallmarks of modernity and advancement and, consequently, English ascendancy in both fields was considered the proof of its superiority and the consequence of its distinctive features. Therefore, the traits of this distinctiveness were exported and imitated in the outer boundaries of the British islands and empire which would consequently undergo a process of anglicisation.

However, recent research has emphasised the creative role of the provinces in their relation with the metropolis and the multifaceted nature of notions of Britishness[10]. Without denying the key role played by cultural and linguistic elements of English origin, these authors have remarked that the dominant English substrate was often transformed and mediated by the active partaking of the provinces. They have focused on the role of the provinces, arguing that they actively intervened in the key processes through which Britain emerged as nation in the eighteenth century. The periphery of the British islands was vigorously engaged in the commercial and imperial expansion which have been typically characterised as English. Both processes

[10] See, for instance, Bailyn and Morgan (eds.), *Strangers within the Realm*, H. V. Bowen, *Elites, Enterprise and the Making of the British Overseas Empire, 1688-1775* (London, 1996), Stephen Conway, *The British Isles and the War of American Independence* (Oxford, 2000), Colin Kidd, 'North Britishness and the Nature of Eighteenth Century British Patriotisms', *The Historical Journal*, 39, (1996), pp. 361-382, Ned C. Landsman, 'The Provinces and the Empire. Scotland, the American Colonies and the Development of British Provincial Identity', in Lawrence Stone (ed.), *An Imperial State at War. Britain from 1689 to 1815* (London & New York, 1994), pp. 258-287 and Wilson, *The Sense of the People.*

were used by the people of the fringes to partake in national dynamics on a more equal footing and obtain their share of the benefits. Similarly, other elements that lay at the core of notions of Englishness were used (and often transformed) by the margins in order to assert their stakes in the process of nation building and exert influence on metropolitan cultural patterns and notions of identity. Thus, for instance, the expansion of English at the expense of the decline of Celtic languages was certainly the product of a policy of linguistic imperialism but also the result of a conscious choice on the part of Scots and Welsh, who used it as a means of getting benefits and advantages. Moreover, the provinces played a decisive part in encouraging sentiments of British national identity, fostering identification with Britain and praising the imperial expansion as a British rather than as an English exploit[11].

Whether emphasising the provinces' role or the pervasiveness of the centre, it is clear that empire and commerce were crucial issues in the formation of notions of identity and nationhood in this period. They are, thus, fully relevant to the intention of this chapter: to examine the evolution of eighteenth century Scotland in terms of assimilation or rejection of the incorporation to Britain. Certainly the path of Scotland at this moment runs parallel to England and their progressive integration cannot be denied even if in its emotional aspects has been the object of many debates and confronted opinions. In this analysis of the interaction between the drive towards assimilation set by the Union and the persistence of a sense of Scottish distinctiveness, a compromise between the

[11] Bailyn and Morgan (eds.), *Strangers within the Realm* p. 12 and 23.

two positions above mentioned has been sought. Thus, we will proceed to examine the English panorama, focusing on the evolution of patriotic notions and concentrating on the role of commerce, empire, public opinion and politics in the fortunes of definitions of national identity. Finally, we will turn to Scotland, in order to consider its own dynamics of identity, both attending to the Scottish context and to its interaction with the English and British wider world.

COMMERCE, EMPIRE AND THE FORMATION OF IDENTITIES

Commercial success and imperial expansion have been identified as the main basis on which notions of identity (whether inclusive, British, or exclusive, English) were constructed in the eighteenth century. Military enterprises cannot be disconnected from contemporary ideas of nationhood or separated from issues of commerce and empire, whose enlargement was the ultimate aim of most military campaigns. As Colley has demonstrated in her groundbreaking work, British national identity 'was an invention forged above all by war' and 'largely defined itself through fighting'[12]. Besides, as Kathleen Wilson has pointed out, armed confrontations fought in the name of commercial and imperial

[12] Colley, *Britons*, pp. 5 and 9.

prosperity were a significant element of popular politics and a main concern among public opinion[13].

Empire building and commercial prosperity were closely related. For the most part of the eighteenth century, overseas dominance was thought to consist of maritime supremacy sustained on a few trading posts and territorial possessions. The British empire was then conceived as an 'empire of the sea' which rested on commerce and naval power and whose basis was free trade instead of conquest. Under the influence of current mercantilist theories, imperial expansion was deemed essential for the national economy. By allowing control of the colonial markets and the international trading networks, Britain's rule of the seas would secure a favourable balance of trade, maximize commercial benefits and, consequently, advance domestic prosperity and national strength[14].

Beyond theoretical speculation, the economy certainly benefited from imperial expansion. It opened new areas of exchange for mercantile enterprises and provided the manufacturing sector with markets and raw materials. During the eighteenth century, commercial activities had become increasingly dependent on overseas markets and produce. Transoceanic exchange steadily outgrew traditional trading connections with

---

[13] See Wilson, *The Sense of the People*. On the military context of eighteenth century British imperial expansion, see Bowen, *Elites, Enterprise*, pp. 25-30.

[14] See P. J. Marshall, *The Oxford History of the British Empire. The Eighteenth Century* (Oxford & New York, 1998), Vol. II, pp. 6-7 and Kathleen Wilson, 'Empire of Virtue. The Imperial Project and Hanoverian Culture', in Lawrence Stone (ed.), *An Imperial State at War. Britain from 1689 to 1815* (London & New York, 1994), pp. 128-164, p. 132.

Europe, both in proportion and magnitude. For instance, in the first three quarters of the century, British exports to Europe rose 13% while overseas exports increased 738%. Similarly, regarding imports, Europe was displaced from a position of dominance as imports from the Atlantic and Asia underwent a steady rise in value and amount. Rice, calicoes, tobacco, silk, sugar, tea and coffee were increasingly demanded and consumed by the British public and represented a significant share of the produce shipped to Britain[15].

Colonial trade was not only profitable. It also acquired an adventurous and glamorous lustre linked to the luxurious nature of its goods and to the exotic places where they came from. One of the reasons behind its attractiveness was that its products were widely available and affordable thanks to the development of internal commerce. Improved communications and means of transportation carried them more efficiently from London and the flourishing westward ports to the eager consumers throughout the country. The rise of consumerism was both a spur and a consequence of mercantile expansion and became strongly associated with the middle classes. The culture of politeness had transformed the middle class household into the centre of sociability for family and friends and the place were respectability and financial well-being were displayed. Besides, the standardisation of manufactured articles contributed to the spread of consumerism. China, porcelain, fine cutlery, crockery and furniture were purchased as symbols of status. Tea and coffee were

[15] See Bowen, *Elites, Enterprise*, pp. 32-36 and Prest, *Albion Ascendant*, pp. 93-96.

massively consumed not only in middle class households but also by the working classes and in the growing numbers of inns and coffee houses that mushroomed in the increasingly populated towns and cities[16].

The attractions of the empire were also reflected and encouraged by the press, the theatre and literary works. The empire provided contexts, characters and themes for novels and plays. Exotic settings were the backcloth of several works such as Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* or Behn's *Oronoko* (1695, revived in 1759). Later on, the popularity of the account of Cook's travels in the Pacific confirmed the general fascination with the world outside Europe. Beyond literature, many books were devoted to the analysis of commercial operations and market forces, while the press reflected everyday concerns regarding the expansion of credit and speculation, mirrored the enthusiasm about the growing benefits of trade and fostered a general interest in the maintenance of the new prosperity. In addition, the nature, benefits and dangers of commercial societies became recurrent themes in religious texts and in reflections on morality, history and society, of which Scottish conjectural history was a significant example.

The Cult of Commerce, Empire and Patriotic Discourses

By bringing mercantilist theories and commercial activities closer to the wider public, consumption patterns and the printed word helped to create an atmosphere of enthusiasm regarding

[16] See Bowen, *Elites, Enterprise*, p. 73, Prest, *Albion Ascendant*, pp. 152-156.

trading activities which has been termed 'the cult of commerce'. In spite of the doubts and anxieties arisen by its increasing role in the economy and society, for the most part of the eighteenth century commerce provoked almost unanimous praise and support. Commercial prosperity was not only the domain of merchants and traders; it was widely seen as an essential element of everyday life. It was optimistically perceived as a privileged source of affluence that should be pursued in the name of the common good. Furthermore, commerce was considered not only materially desirable but also part of the nation's essence, a key element of patriotic discourses. National identity became thus increasingly linked to commercial prosperity, an association encouraged and conveyed to the public through the expansion of the print. The English nation, then, was celebrated not only because of its liberties and pure religion but also because of its riches, unequalled by its European neighbours[17].

Commerce emerged as a main patriotic concern; its preservation and encouragement was considered the foundation of national interest. At a popular level, continental wars were seen with suspicion and frequently opposed, while conflicts related to the protection of overseas markets were widely supported and even demanded. At the same time, the association between trade and national good was translated into an identification between the commercial sector and national strength and prosperity. By portraying the mercantile community as agents of the common good, the 'cult of commerce' endowed the claims of the men of

[17] See Colley, *Britons*, chapter 2 and Wilson, *The Sense of the People.*

trade with political strength and legitimated their demands in front of the Parliament. In fact, the interests of the mercantile sector were incorporated into the patriotic programme of contemporary popular and oppositionist politics[18].

Hand in hand with the incorporation of commerce into the core of patriotism, empire became a key element of national identity and was seen in the same favourable light as commercial expansion. As the century went by, the press increased the amount of information devoted to maritime and trading ventures thus reflecting and encouraging the interest on imperial issues. Moreover, the press not only mirrored the mercantilist world-view and contemporary notions of power and market relations. By catering for the priorities of its readers (mostly middle class and urban), the press translated the dynamics of world politics into events related to national fortunes, making them familiar and relevant to the domestic public. As Kathleen Wilson remarked, 'the newspaper press, even in its most apolitical manifestations supported the accumulationist and mercantile view of the empire – that is, that the empire was at heart about trade, commerce, accumulation and consumption and as much augmented national as well as individual standing, wealth and power'[19]. Without renouncing to the exotic appeal of the overseas world, the press brought it closer to the public by giving an epic lustre to the actions of the British abroad and by portraying imperial expansion as a glorification of the national and patriotic character. Similarly,

[18] See Wilson, *The Sense of the People*.

[19] Wilson, 'Empire of Virtue', p. 136. On these issues, see also Wilson, *The Sense of the People*.

the theatre used the language and metaphors of trade to depict imperial pursuits as a nationalist enterprise, in which national identity was exalted and defined through the struggles against corrupted European powers and the indigenous other.

The conflation of empire with the discourses of patriotism, which were marked by an emphasis on the freedom and morality of the nation, reinforced the self-gratifying and distorted view through which imperial ventures were portrayed to the public. As a consequence, 'the British empire was imagined to consist of flourishing and commercially viable colonies, populated largely by free (and white) British subjects and supplemented by commercial outposts in 'exotic' climates, which served as bulwarks of trade, prosperity, naval strength and virtue for the parent state'[20]. Territorial expansion was a middle class enterprise, led by fair-minded, humanitarian and civilising purposes, aimed at spreading the benefits of British political constitution and commerce around the world. This mystification of empire hid the cruelty and exploits of imperial expansion and was based on a comparison between the excellence of the British imperial enterprise and, on the one hand, the gruesome nature of Spanish and French power and, on the other, the barbarity of non-white colonial subjects such as the Amerindian population. At its highest peak, imperialist enthusiasm required unreserved support for aggressive expansionist policies which were identified with the pursuit of the public good while the

[20] Wilson, *The Sense of the People*, p. 155.

questioning of the empire's benefits was linked to unpatriotic attitudes and subversion[21].

Extra-parliamentary politics made a good use of this idealised vision of empire. Political campaigns of the period associated empire and commercial success, national prosperity, civic virtue and political liberty at home, while linking it to the diffusion of civilisation and freedom abroad. In short, imperial expansion came to represent the reverse of the governmental bribery that oppositionist politics attacked. In this discourse, empire represented the quintessence of Englishness while corrupted ministers were associated with foreign powers and the reckless pursue of self-interest[22].

The Cult of Commerce and Social Stability

Such enthusiasm mobilised different social groups and created unexpected alliances such as the harmonious relation between the landed and the commercial elites. As a result, it has been argued, the 'cult of commerce' ensured social stability, helping the landed oligarchy to maintain their hold on the nation and, most importantly, to survive relatively unscathed the political and social upheavals that went across Western Europe[23].

Secured by the privileges of land that guaranteed them an almost exclusive access to the highest ranks of political and social authority, the landed elites adopted an approving attitude towards

---

21 Wilson, *The Sense of the People*.

22 Wilson, *The Sense of the People*.

23 See Colley, *Britons*, chapters 2 and 4, and Bowen, *Elites, Enterprise*, pp. 67-69.

commerce even if it was clear that they did not consider the commercial elite as their equals. The political elite's praise of commerce was linked to the success of mercantilist theories across Europe and acknowledged the actual relevance that commercial activities had for the nation's wealth and strength. London, the centre of courtly politics and aristocratic power display, was also the biggest and busiest commercial metropolis in Europe. Domestic and foreign trade provided the bulk of commercial taxation while overseas trade proved essential for the maintenance of British naval strength, supplying the navy with cheap training and recruitment in times of war. Consequently, the British landed elite felt inclined to believe that a proper balance between land and commerce was necessary to protect the national economy.

Beyond the links between the landed elite and state politics, aristocratic fortunes had become increasingly involved in commercial activities. The eighteenth century witnessed a process of diversification of aristocratic investment and economic activities. Seeking to enlarge their wealth, landowners endeavoured to extend the scope of the economic activities undertaken in their states, contributing decisively to the agricultural revolution. However, they also sought the better rates of profit that could be obtained from investment in commercial activities, manufactures and high finance. Members of the elite channelled resources into a wide range of business and commercial schemes designed to gain from colonial and trading expansion. Land speculation in the colonies offered financial profits and personal advancement. Political careers and the narrow prospects of the sons of impoverished titles could also benefit from joining the expanding

British army. In addition, through big purveyors such as the commercial companies and small individual traders, commercial prosperity made credit available not only for the state but also for the expensive tastes of the aristocracy[24].

Furthermore, there were links of a personal kind between the nobility and commerce. The culture of politeness acted as a powerful element of social and cultural integration between the members of the landed and the commercial elites. Wealthy merchants strived to fulfil the requirements of politeness, adopting patterns of consumption, learning and socialisation shared by the members of the aristocracy. Public venues such as theatres and salons not only allowed polite social intercourse between both groups but also opened a space for cultural exchange in which aristocratic manners were imitated while the spirit of the merchant elite permeated the aristocratic ethos. Frequent contacts and cultural closeness together with economic interest encouraged upward social mobility. Even if the upper echelons of the aristocracy remained closed, marital alliances between gentry families and the mercantile community became more common and unproblematic[25].

Nevertheless, the mutual dependence of the landed and commercial interests rested not only on the side of the aristocracy. The mercantile community realised that their prosperity depended greatly on state development, foreign policy and war and so they were aware of what they were to gain from favourable government

---

[24] Bowen, *Elites, Enterprise*, p. 40, and Colley, *Britons*.

[25] Bowen, *Elites, Enterprise*.

measures. The Hanoverian restoration had been advantageous for the commercial sector since annual sessions of Parliament allowed merchants to press MPs through petitions and lobby pressure. The government had allowed a more ample sphere of action to individuals by abolishing many of the trading companies, except for those operating in distant and dangerous places (such as India). The Navigation Acts of 1690 had protected the interests of the trading sector by establishing that colonial goods should be introduced in Britain through British fleets and British ports. Similarly, trade with the colonies should be carried through domestic ships[26].

Fiscal developments after 1688 had been mutually beneficial. Fiscal and administrative arrangements were enacted which allowed Britain to develop the capacity to wage war and deploy resources on a global scale. As a result, national debt was more efficiently managed through mechanisms that facilitated short-term and long-term borrowing, the most important of which was the Bank of England. The establishment of a system of public finance encouraged the development of a financial sector, centred on the Bank of England and the City of London, in which the most successful among the mercantile community became increasingly involved. This influential financier class, known by its contemporaries as 'the monied interest', expanded the traditional scope of banking activities and played a key role in imperial and commercial expansion. State structures and commercial success thus reinforced each other since this group had as its main activity

[26] See Colley, *Britons*, chapter 2.

providing financial support to the state and private commercial enterprises. Besides, the fiscal system favoured merchants and businessmen by concentrating the bulk of taxation on landed property and commodities. Through foreign policy and constant wars with France and other mercantile and colonial powers (such as the Dutch or the Spanish) new markets, colonies and trading posts were obtained while the existing trading routes were protected by British naval strength. The eighteenth century policy of constant harassment and confrontation with France was cherished by the mercantile classes because it undermined their direct competitors[27].

But the mercantile classes not only profited from the state. They also collaborated in the defence of the existing order. Their activities were bound to considerable risks and vulnerability. Trading routes rested more on different degrees of violent quarrelling and harassment than on peaceful commercial agreements. Therefore, they could be disrupted by a reverse of the fortunes of war or by the complex manoeuvrings of diplomacy. In addition, trade depended on credit. Borrowing and lending money not only supplied commercial activities with the resources required to undertake new ventures but also was a necessary complement to trade. In so far as credit was unstable and dependent on confidence, it was particularly sensitive to social and political upheavals. Therefore, serious disruptions of the existing order were rejected and feared by the men and women engaged in commerce and credit. It is not surprising that the commercial elite

[27] See Colley, *Britons* and Bowen, *Elites, Enterprise*, pp. 13-16 and pp. 60-64.

felt inclined to collaborate with rather than challenge the landed elite and opted for stability and loyalty to the ruling elite by distancing themselves from the Jacobite cause[28].

However, there were fractures in the harmonious relation between the landed and the commercial classes. Under the influence of civic humanist and Christian distrust of movable wealth, aristocratic apologists directed a sustained criticism against financial and commercial activities in which hostility against enriched individuals turned into landowners was mixed with the defence of the traditional noble families as bulwarks of civic virtue and common good. While those living on less consistent forms of wealth could easily take flight in times of national danger and should thus be deemed unreliable, long established estate owners held a permanent allegiance to the country due to the unmovable nature of the source of their wealth. Consequently, land ensured a dependable commitment to the nation's good and, in contrast to commercial activities, engendered well-defined social obligations, which, it was argued, deserved to be recognised[29].

In spite of inner divisions between peerage and gentry groups and of differences in wealth, politics and geographical origin, the landed elite had a strong internal cohesion. They had a common ethos rooted in uniform patterns of belief and instruction, similar lifestyle, and the firm conviction that they had the right to certain privileges in exchange for their social duties. Besides, the role of London as a magnet for the aristocracy contributed to further

---

[28] Colley, *Britons*.

[29] Colley, *Britons* and Bowen, *Elites, Enterprise*, p. 50.

erode differences and local particularities. Therefore, even if many of them resolutely supported trade in Westminster, the landed elite was still imbued with a strong sense of its own superiority and disinclined to consider even the richest merchants their equals. Among them, commerce was still viewed with disdain even as a way of make a living for their impoverished members. Men of trade were aware that they came behind men of land. They were compelled to move into land if they wanted to be eligible for a Parliament seat and even as late as 1790, only a sixth of all MPs came from a commercial background. Despite all the praise devoted to commerce from all the sections of society, land ownership remained the source of power and status on top of the political and social ladder[30].

The culture of politeness had its limitations as social cement between both groups. Even among wealthy merchants deference towards the landed elite was desirable and intermarriage with the highest ranks of the aristocracy unacceptable. Thus, the ties created by the gentlemanly ideal only worked as long as the mercantile community knew its place. However, many among the financial and the commercial community openly rejected the traits of politeness associated with the aristocracy. Deferential attitudes and vicarious influence on politics were becoming increasingly unacceptable as the century progressed and the wealth derived from commerce augmented.

---

[30] Bowen, *Elites, Enterprise*, p. 52 and 64-69.

THE 1760S AND THE 1770S

In the period in which Alexander wrote his *History of Women*, issues of empire and commerce generated still more interest and concern. The end of the Seven Years War had extended British colonial possessions enormously, even if some of the areas obtained by conquest had been relinquished in the Peace of Paris. In North America, Canada, Florida and the territory east of Mississippi were now under British control. Regarding West Indies, the Grenada, St. Vincent, Dominica and Tobago were added to the existing possessions in Antigua, Barbados, Jamaica and Montserrat. Minorca was regained in Europe while French influence was eroded in the East. Moreover, the successful military campaigns of the East India Company in the late 1750s and 1760s had granted near sovereign authority over a great part of the Indian subcontinent.

The success of the Seven Years War determined the rise of England as an international and imperial great power, fostering the celebration of a superior English distinctiveness and enthusiastic attitudes regarding empire and commerce. Imperial images permeated the press, the theatre and popular festivities while in Parliament imperial issues were devoted more attention than before. Nevertheless, the extent of territorial expansion also provoked anxiety and unrest. It generated a public debate regarding the relative worth of recent overseas acquisitions and the best means of securing and administering them[31].

[31] See Wilson, *The Sense of the People*.

On a popular level, the answer was to pursue territorial expansion in order to extend further the benefits of British government and religion across the world and secure the riches derived from commerce. However, particularly among the political elite, there was a feeling that Britain's imperial role had been stretched too far and, accordingly, that a policy of stability and retrenchment was necessary to protect the new overseas gains.

In front of the vast extensions that should now be managed from the metropolis, it seemed no longer appropriate to maintain the traditional loose and ill-defined imperial policies and framework. During the first part of the century, the state had deployed a minimalist policy that encouraged peaceful trading activities but avoided the acquisition of new territories. It was feared that the costs of protecting and administering an extended empire would endanger the benefits obtained from commercial activities. Although these fears persisted and were fostered by the huge increase in the national debt caused by the conflict, after the Seven Years' War the old policy of inhibition was largely considered inadequate for the preservation of the enlarged empire that was now a reality[32].

These years also witnessed a growing concern about the nature of the territory brought under British rule. The new gains increased racial and religious diversity and contradicted the traditional image of an empire of settlers, populated by fellow protestant and white subjects. Non-white groups and, especially, the catholic population of Canada were perceived as alien in the

[32] See Wilson, *The Sense of the People.*

metropolis, fostering fears about the influence of the colonies on the nation's body politic. Images of oriental luxury, vice and despotism were blended with descriptions of popish taste for absolutism and used to back calls for a closer control of the empire. A more authoritarian attitude was necessary not only to protect the colonies and commerce but also to protect the nation from the disorderly tendencies of these new and strange imperial subjects[33].

These debates generated tensions among the British public and between the metropolis and the colonies. The move towards a tighter control was rejected by some sections of the population who felt that it contradicted the image of the empire as a humanitarian enterprise peopled by free subjects. Comparisons between Britain and the corrupt Roman empire were revived, which highlighted the polluting influence of tyrannical imperial rule over the nation's body politic. Advocates of tighter control had to face also the hostility of the colonies which up to this moment had enjoyed a significant degree of autonomy and self-management. In addition, government restrictions on territorial expansion were opposed not only by a great part of the public but also by the colonial elites who profited from land speculation and colonial settlement. The benefits of imperial enlargement were certainly difficult to relinquish, as proved by some members of the government who, while supporting in Westminster the policy of

[33] See Wilson, *The Sense of the People*.

containment, were in fact involved in colonial schemes of territorial expansion[34].

The challenges brought forward by the enlarged size of colonial possessions and their administration reinforced an underlying but sustained sense of national malaise that can be traced to the 1750s. The years of patronage-based Whig rule had fostered fears about the spread of corruption across the nation. At the same time, the initial defeats in front of the Jacobite invasion and similar setbacks abroad generated the belief that the vitality of the body politic was being eroded by a decline of martial courage, civic spirit and patriotism. As a result, commercial prosperity and imperial standing were endangered by the joint workings of national weakness and ministerial vice as proved, according to the extra parliamentary opposition, by the timidity of the foreign policy in front of French offensives.

Extra parliamentary campaigns identified the political elite as the main culprit, stirring fears of general effeminacy and emasculation and exacerbating existing apprehensions about the nature, viability and morality of the nation's aristocratic leadership. The landed elite underwent renewed attacks that linked aristocracy with selfishness, political corruption and defeat. It was argued that the aristocracy was infected by the worst consequences of luxury and economic bonanza and, consequently, had become weak and effeminate, unable to pursue the determined and aggressive policies that the people demanded and the nation's standing required. The aristocracy, thus, seemed to have forfeited and

[34] See Wilson, *The Sense of the People.*

subverted the manly traits that characterised national identity and patriotism.

Patriotic discourses and oppositionist political campaigns reinforced the links between these anxieties and latent xenophobic attitudes. As a means to reinvigorate national and patriotic strength, extra parliamentary discourses used the 'other' within and without to construct a series of oppositions through which English and British national identity could be defined in terms of superiority and imperial ascendancy[35]. Thus, the 1750s witnessed a revival of anti-French, anti-Catholic and anti-Caledonian feelings. The aristocracy was identified with the enemy, France, and accused of imitating its frivolous and feminine fashions. As a result, the political elite came to be associated with the 'other', both in gender terms, women, or in a geopolitical sense, the French.

By contrast, imperial and commercial expansion were advocated as the best remedy for the national ills and identified with civic virtue and patriotic endeavours. However, this association between commerce, empire and patriotism was drawn on a very unstable ground. Civic humanist and Christian stoic stress on frugality and martial virtues inspired the growing disquiet about the nation's fate. Yet, a key element of these discourses was a deep concern about the polluting effects of commercial prosperity and luxury. Thus, the defence of empire and commerce as the safeguards of patriotism could easily be reversed and turned into their condemnation as the main culprits of the nation's lack of nerve. This is the case of most of the authors of the Scottish

[35] Wilson, *The Sense of the People*, p. 169.

Enlightenment, who remained sceptical in front of the enthusiastic 'cult of commerce' and expressed their anxieties about the growth of empire and trade in their writings[36].

The construction of national identity in this context was highly problematic, as would be proved in the following decades. Mystifications of empire as an enterprise driven by benevolence and humanitarianism would be challenged as the enlargement of the overseas possessions provoked a redefinition of the imperial project and the relations with the North American colonies became more and more tense. At the same time, the stress on Englishness as the main core of national identity was redressed. A more open and less hostile sense of identity emerged towards the end of the century, as the fortunes of the state and empire proved to be also dependent on the non-English members of the Union, who besides, increased their commitment with the country by increasingly becoming involved in imperial and administrative tasks.

Political Unrest

The anxieties created by the expansion of the colonial possessions coincided with a political landscape characterised by instability and strife. The ascension of George III marked the end of the Whig political dominance. The new king rejected the assumption that the Whig establishment was the best support for

---

[36] On Hume's critique of speculation and excessive commercialisation and imperial growth, see J. G. Pocock, 'Hume and the American Revolution', *Virtue, Commerce and History. Essays on Political Thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century* (New York, 1985), pp. 125-142.

the monarchy's interests and allowed a wider sphere of political manoeuvre for Tories and independent MPs. In addition, the system of patronage that had maintained Whig political monopoly was showing clear signs of collapse. As a result, parliamentary politics underwent significant changes, such as the emergence of new political actors and the split within the Whig politicians, some of whom remained aligned with the new political order while others chose to define themselves as the parliamentary opposition[37].

At the same time, a wider space for debate and political dissent was opened. Jacobitism had disappeared as a real threat and, thus, political disaffection was no longer associated with disunion and treason. The dissolution of the Whig hegemony determined that party differences lost their political significance since the strategy of malignment of the Tory party was no longer beneficial for political purposes. New alliances irrespective of past divisions were drawn in Parliament and, subsequently, Whigs and Tories were reintegrated into a united ruling class.

Regarding extra parliamentary politics, the end of the political exclusion of the Tories and the new opportunities opened for them within Westminster had as a consequence that elite politicians voiced their opposition to the government mainly in Parliament rather than resorting to the 'people' as a means to get the political resonance they had lacked due to the Whig hegemony. Hence, unlike previous decades, popular politics had no

---

[37] See John Brewer, *Party Ideology and Popular Politics at the Accession of George III* (Cambridge, 1976). On extra parliamentary politics before this time, see Wilson, *The Sense of the People.*

aristocratic leadership. The middle classes had, thus, the possibility of acting with more independence and autonomy in politics and, influenced by the anxieties about aristocratic corruption, profited from it. In this moment, 'the initiative for dissident politics was seized by the extra parliamentary nation itself, particularly its middling and professional members, who resented their marginalized place in a political system now seen as dominated by antagonistic interests'[38].

The expansion of the print culture augmented the scope and magnitude of extra parliamentary campaigns. From mid-century onwards, the number of newspapers had steadily increased and the structures that supported printing activities were enlarged. However, the main difference with previous decades was the diversification of printed materials (including political pamphlets and artefacts) and the rapid growth of new sorts of journalism, most importantly the provincial newspaper, the periodical magazine and the review journal[39]. The press constituted a key element in the formation of a public opinion at a national level which, infused with a substantial degree of political consciousness, supported oppositional politics and endowed their claims with a resonance that was felt in Westminster.

Although due to the limitations of the electoral system, the public had little impact on parliamentary elections, the strength and pervasiveness of popular political culture and the wide support received by oppositionist campaigns could not pass unnoticed by

---

[38] Wilson, *The Sense of the People*, p. 212.

[39] Brewer, *Party Ideology and Popular Politics*, p. 16.

the Parliament. Even if they clearly did not believe on the legitimacy of the claims of the 'people', parliamentary groups actively sought popular support (although mediated by their leadership), showed an increased concern about public image and resorted frequently to the press as a political weapon.

Together with the development of the press, the circumstances of the 1760s were propitious for the emergence of more vigorous and radical forms of popular politics. Regarding the economy, the decade was characterised by depression. Bad harvests were followed by rising food prices. The end of the Seven Years' War provoked a commercial and industrial recession and saturated the labour market with unemployed ex-servicemen. Social unrest increased and resulted in riots and strikes. In these conditions, popular discontent mounted, providing extra parliamentary politics with a responsive audience for its campaigns.

Radical Politics

The opportunities for radical activities were seized by John Wilkes. He channelled these discontents, launching a series of campaigns against the political establishment whose success transformed him from a dissolute journalist into a key figure of the political landscape[40]. Wilkite politics drew on themes from

[40] Born in a dissenter family, John Wilkes is equally renowned for his dissipated behaviour and for his role as a political activist. After being elected in 1757 as a Member of Parliament, he failed to obtain a government post. His resentment led him to oppositionist journalism. In 1763 he was charged with sedition for libelling the king and his minister Lord Bute in the forty-fifth number of the *North Briton*, the newspaper he edited. Although secured by his parliamentary privilege, Wilkes faced successive trials for obscenity, libel and sedition, and fled to France. In 1768 he returned and, although being deeply indebted and still an

previous oppositionist campaigns, enlarging their traditional demands and marketing them for wider sections of the public. He developed a broadly based political movement combining an innovative use of the press, a skilful management of public opinion and mobilisation, and the employment of propagandistic techniques such as caricature and satire[41].

Wilkite campaigns cut across class distinctions. His defence of political egalitarism extended his appeal among the lower classes while, taking advantage of forms of social protest legitimised by tradition, the radicalism of some of his demands was made acceptable for the most important part of his supporters: professionals, merchants, lawyers, in short, middle class would-be gentlemen. Glorification of patriotism further enlarged his support among the lower and middle orders of society. This strategy of inclusion had been common in previous oppositional campaigns in which lower artisans and working classes had been effectively mobilised. However, despite advocating social inclusiveness, popular politics also involved mechanisms of exclusion. By insisting on respectability, peace, decency and good order as sources of legitimacy, the middle classes were tracing a clear line between their acceptable political participation and the lower classes, which remained associated with disorder and lack of

outlaw, succeeded in getting elected for the county of Middlesex. In front of Parliament efforts to repeal his election, Wilkes mobilised popular opinion on his behalf and was finally allowed to take his seat in 1774. He maintained his political role until his death in 1797.

41 On radical politics and Wilkes, see Wilson, *The Sense of the People*, Colley, *Britons*, chapter 3 and Brewer, *Party Ideology and Popular Politics*.

control and whose capacity for a self-contained patriotism was highly suspected.

Wilkite campaigns drew upon existing aspects of the oppositionist ideology. They renewed the issue of the people's right to resist illegitimate authority and justified the right to rebellion. Wilkes himself was portrayed as the living symbol of the struggle of the English people against oligarchy oppression. However, Wilkite propaganda also modified many of these elements. From the 1760s onwards, political radicalism extended the anti-aristocratic rhetoric inherited from previous decades. Instead of focusing on a single prominent figure, the attack on aristocracy became more wide-ranging and straightforward, undermining the institutional bases of aristocratic power: birthrights and the monopoly of the land. Deference attitudes were substituted by an emphasis on the meritocratic ethos which was the basis of middle class identity. If aristocrats (and the king) wanted to retain their privileged position, they should realise that they were 'trustees' of the people and should act for the public good. The landed elite was soon aware of the dangers underlying these criticisms and, as Linda Colley has suggested, from the last quarter of the century onwards, British aristocracy exerted itself to appear in the eyes of the nation as the champions of patriotism, underlining their social utility[42].

Besides, Wilkes made good use of deep-rooted antagonisms. Papists and Frenchmen were frequently scorned and blamed for the national misfortunes. Anti-Caledonian hostility reached one of

[42] See Colley, *Britons*, chapter 4.

its highest peaks. In Wilkite propaganda, the old stereotype of the destitute and cunning Scot assumed different forms, ranging from traditional images, such as the rustic Highlander and the despotic Jacobite, to new representations, more suitable for the times. One of the latter was the greedy Lowlander careerist, often depicted in swarms flying southwards ready to deprive the English from employment and to outnumber them. Wilkite anger focused extensively on the figure of Lord Bute who became associated with effeminacy, aristocratic vice, self-interest, francophilia, government corruption and national defeat. The dangers that threatened the nation thus came to be embodied by the figure of a Scotsman[43].

Radical politics fostered political instability and extended previous demands for political change. As in previous decades, Wilkite politics insisted on governmental accountability and on the defence of the public good and English political liberties against the corruption of those in power. However, now a major constitutional change was demanded: a parliamentary reform that granted the middle classes and the mercantile community political representation[44].

Radical politics stressed the gendered grounds upon which political subjectivities had been conceived by emphasising the manly nature of patriotism. Wilkite austere and audacious 'manly patriotism' opposed the readiness of the true citizen to rise against tyranny, to the dullness of the effeminate aristocracy. Aristocracy was not only linked to submissive and unconventional sexual

---

43 See Colley, *Britons*, Wilson, *The Sense of the People*.

44 See Wilson, *The Sense of the People* and Brewer, *Party Ideology and Popular Politics*.

practices but also to female passivity and, therefore, to that section of the population whose lack of political existence was unquestionable. In fact, this gendered model of political resistance reflected the current hostility to female presence in politics. Popular radicalism expressed and fostered widespread concerns about stable gender demarcations, unconventional sexualities and separate spheres for the sexes. The closure of the boundaries of citizenship to women and the restriction of the gender identities available for political subjects ran parallel to the enforcement of clear gender definitions which became even more prominent after the outbreak of the American War. However, the political activities of the period mobilised a significant number of women who joined political associations and participated in the debates that the American War provoked. At the same time, women not only contributed importantly to the war effort but were also the target of frequent calls for female participation. In sum, female involvement in politics was often tolerated as long as it did not infringe the gendered rules of decorum[45].

The political radicalism of the 1760s and 1770s anticipated many of the processes which will gather strength in the following century, such as the emergent role of the middle and the working classes as political actors or the growing strength of claims for parliamentary reform. However, Wilkite social inclusiveness was plagued by paradoxes. Wilkes sought the support of the working

---

[45] See Wilson, *The Sense of the People*, Conway, *The British Isles and the War* and Brewer, *Party Ideology and Popular Politics,* Dror Wahrman, '*Percy*'s Prologue: From Gender Play to Gender Panic in Eighteenth-Century England', *Past and Present*, 159, (1998), pp. 113-160.

classes while giving preference to definitions of citizenship which were based on middle class identities and demands. Similarly, radical politics opted for measures of social control of the lower orders and encouraged in the working population deference to their middle class employers. Regarding the construction of national identity, the Wilkite movement proved similarly contradictory. Wilkite campaigners fuelled a violent sense of Englishness, opposed to the progressive transformation of the island into a single political entity. Even so, Wilkes's strong defence of English distinctiveness and rejection of all possible integration 'offered a reassurance to his more intolerant and worried countrymen that they would not be absorbed into an all-embracing and non-Anglocentric Great Britain'[46]. Eventually, by promoting confidence on the resilience of the English character, Wilkite propaganda facilitated the process through which Britain was forged and assumed as a main referent for national identity. By the same token, although Wilkite activities fostered political unrest, they also promoted stability because the glorification of Englishness encouraged self-confidence among its contemporaries, helping them to cope with the challenges and the confusion of the decade.

The American War

The growing frictions with the North American colonists and the eventual declaration of war further complicated this panorama. As a result of the conflict, economic crisis and social unrest

[46] Colley, *Britons*, p. 117.

escalated. The beginning of the hostilities contracted and disrupted overseas trade while the national debt mounted. As the salaries fell and food prizes and unemployment rose, working class living conditions deteriorated, generating social strife and, among the better-off, an increasing concern about the moral regeneration of the poor and the necessity of tighter control of the lower classes. The war offered opportunities of enrichment for those whose business were related to the army, who underwent a sharp criticism and were accused of profiting from a national emergency[47].

The spread of poverty revived the anxieties about the corruption of the body politic. War and impoverishment were thought to be deeply connected; both of them were the consequence of the nation's moral decay, of 'the dissipation and luxury of the age, the increase of all places of diversion and amusement throughout the kingdom and the excessive spirit of gaming'[48]. Whether understood as a divine punishment, as it was often preached, or, according to the discourse of civic humanism, the result of the corrupting consequences of luxury and dissipation, the war was seen by many as the sign of the need for national regeneration.

There is evidence that existing divisions within the metropolis, either of a social, political or religious nature, were exacerbated by the dispute with the colonists. The cause of the government obtained support mainly among urban and rural elites, among the professions and the better-off within the middle classes

---

[47] Conway, *The British Isles and the War*, pp. 94-112.

[48] Quoted in Conway, *The British Isles and the War*, p. 116.

whereas artisans, shopkeepers and manual workers tended to align themselves with the anti-war faction. Religious and political differences were reflected on attitudes towards the war. In order to prove their loyalty and reliability, Catholics eagerly supported the government, while dissenters generally disagreed. The hierarchies of the Anglican Church, by contrast, actively supported the crown. Existing parliamentary differences were further divided over the management of the American rebellion and the extra parliamentary movements backed the colonists and included their claims in their programmes[49].

However, there were exceptions to this general overview which tends to simplify the responses generated by the conflict, which overall were mixed, often cutting across class and political divisions. Resolute anti-war positions could be found among ultraconservative figures such as Josiah Tucker[50]. Reactions to the conflict, besides, were neither wholly pro-colonists nor totally pro-government and the two factions often drew on the same arguments to defend their positions. The concern about national decline was shared by advocates and opponents to the war. For both sides commercial prosperity and the preservation of empire were essential for the protection of Britain's international standing. Religious arguments were used by the two sides. For the supporters of the colonists, the Americans were brethren in religion, while for those against, they were religious enthusiasts and fanatics. Regarding politics, the government faction argued that the

[49] See Conway, *The British Isles and the War*, pp. 134-145.

[50] On Josiah Tucker, see J. G. A. Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce and History* (New York, 1985), pp. 157-193.

colonists had undertaken an unnatural rebellion against the constitutional order. They were depicted as furious republicans who wanted to spread anarchy and subvert the principles upon which traditional English liberties rested. Anti-war campaigners also claimed to defend English political rights. They portrayed the American colonists as fellow subjects and brothers who were fighting for the traditional liberties of Englishmen in front of the authoritarian and despotic tendencies of the government[51].

Radical demands for parliamentary reform were strengthened by the American conflict. Under increasing financial need and since the burden of taxation on British population was already the cause of many tensions, alternative sources of revenue were sought in North America via the Stamp Act of 1765. However, the colonists opposed parliamentary measures, rejecting the argument that the growing need to protect imperial possessions demanded higher financial contributions on their part because, once the French threat had been removed, they felt more secure than ever. In addition, they believed to be only dependent on the king and, since they lacked political representation in Westminster, not tied by parliamentary resolutions[52]. The American emphasis on 'no taxation without representation' could be easily transplanted into the English context where the franchise was very narrow and yet the entire population was affected by indirect taxation on necessities such as beer, candles and soap. The debate over taxation provided, thus, the foundation for the radicalisation of the

[51] See Conway, *The British Isles and the War*, pp. 145-165.

[52] Colley, *Britons*.

demands of popular politics, which went now beyond government accountability and the 'purification' of the Parliament from corruption to include the enlargement of the enfranchised nation and the incorporation of disenfranchised new populous and wealthy towns[53].

For radical politics, brotherhood with the Americans rested not only on their similarities as white and protestant people but also on their political claims, which were analogous to those of the English nation, and on their rejection of the despotic tendencies of the government. According to Wilkite politics, the conflict with the Americans was provoked by the growing tyrannical tendencies of those in power which were likely to permeate domestic rule. Under the pernicious influence of Lord Bute, the government was determined to destroy the people's liberties and political rights (both within and without), enlist honest Englishmen to fight against their fellow brethren, and endanger Britain's commercial and international standing. The conflict heightened previous fears regarding the survival of the nation and provoked a revival of anti-Catholicism, francophobia and anxieties about the emasculation of the body politic. Similarly, anti-war campaigners reinvigorated themes formerly present in radical politics: anti-Scottish feelings rose, attacks against the aristocracy intensified while the calls to 'manly patriotism' were redoubled[54].

Some authors have emphasised the cosmopolitan nature of loyalist stances regarding the war. Advocates of the government's

---

[53] Brewer, *Party Ideology and Popular Politics*, p. 20.

[54] Wilson, *The Sense of the People*.

position accused the Americans of breaking the international laws upon which European relations and stability rested. The loyalist faction claimed to be on the side of civility and civilisation, traits whose roots were defined as European and which were opposed to the barbarism, enthusiasm and disrespect for the norms of international politics of the Americans. In front of the claims of anti-war campaigners, the loyalist side depicted the rebels as a despotic crowd whereas English authority was associated with tolerance and the benefits of English constitutionalism. Accordingly, the Scots were praised for their contribution to the war effort, both in troops and in their support to the crown, the Irish were granted a more equal role within the Union and relaxed measures towards Catholicism were enforced in Canada[55].

This view was part of a conservative ideology which also made use of patriotic discourses, blended with traditional paternalistic attitudes and the culture of politeness, with the aim of protecting the position of the patrician elite against the attacks of popular politics. Accordingly, the American rebellion was linked to political radicalism at home. At the same time, these discourses established a clear association between the benefits of stability and the rule of law, and the perpetuation of the traditional ruling classes, whose position was justified on the grounds that trained and experienced decision makers were needed to avoid the dangers of revolt and secession. Similarly, popular demands for political reform were rejected, alleging that only the nobility had the

[55] See Eliga H. Gould, 'American Independence and Britain's Counter-Revolution', *Past and Present*, 154, (1997), pp. 107-141.

capacity – due to their birth and their belonging to the culture of politeness – to pursue the interests of the country without falling to corruption and external pressures[56].

Once the war broke out and, later on, France, Spain and the Netherlands joined the Americans, anti-war stances were more and more difficult to sustain. Anti-war campaigners had never wanted the independence of the colony; their main aim, like the government's, was to preserve North American possessions and the commercial benefits which they generated. In front of the loss of British lives and the atrocities reported from the American battlefields, less and less people were eager to openly defend the cause of the Americans. In addition, due to the alliance between the Americans and absolutist European powers, the conflict could no longer be depicted as a civil war or the government represented as a tyrannical power seeking to crush the liberties of the helpless Americans. A different picture emerged in which Britain was portrayed as struggling against a more powerful force composed by its traditional and despotic enemies. In this context, hostility against the French and the Spanish mounted and fears of invasion overcame concerns about imperial integrity, bringing together the opponents of the conflict and the government[57].

The war undermined the association between the mercantile classes, imperial expansion and national prosperity which lay at the heart of previous definitions of national identity and provided the core of extra parliamentary politics. The mercantile community

---

[56] See Gould, 'American Independence'.

[57] Conway, *The British Isles and the War*.

split over the conflict; although some rejected an armed solution, many others quickly demanded the use of force against the rebellion. As a result, men of trade were no longer seen as firm advocates of liberty and the common good; they were liable to the same narrow mindedness which was attacked in the political elite. Civic humanist concerns about luxury enlarged these criticisms. In words of the *London Evening Post* (1778), 'merchants and genuine patriots are not synonymous terms'; they had been corrupted by their 'professional lust of wealth [which] narrows their minds, enslaves their understandings, and throws a callous insensibility over their public feelings and understandings'[58]. This mistrust of commercial activities had roots in former decades since events such as the bursting of the South Sea bubble in the 1720s had already raised anxieties about speculation, high finance and their links with the commercial activities[59].

The decline of the approving attitudes regarding commerce went together with a rethinking of empire and particularly of the relationship between the principles and practices of mercantilist imperialism and libertarian politics. After the enthusiasm generated by the British success in the Seven Years' War, the enormity and diversity of British possessions generated calls for a more authoritarian attitude, straining the extra parliamentary association between empire and the extension of the English liberties throughout the world[60]. Several processes in the 1760s and 1770s

---

[58] Quoted in Wilson, *The Sense of the People*, p. 270.

[59] Wilson, *The Sense of the People*, pp. 117-122 and Colley, *Britons.*

[60] Wilson, *The Sense of the People*, p. 274.

highlighted the gruesome aspects of imperial expansion. The attempts to exterminate the indigenous population on the island of St. Vincent were widely echoed and arose general indignation. The popularity of Cook's explorations increased the sympathy for indigenous peoples and the opposition to the use of force and conquest. Besides, West Indian planters became the object of strong criticisms. They were described as tyrants who had become a source of corruption and political despotism in the metropolitan Parliament. Not surprisingly, the anti-slavery movement in Britain has its roots in these decades.

At the same time, imperial developments in the East provoked public concerns. The East India Company underwent a public questioning which highlighted the lack of humanitarianism of its practices and its unchecked authority and functions. Writers and journalists scorned the newly enriched nabobs and expressed their concerns about the spread of luxury, corruption and effeminacy which stemmed from the Asian empire.

In addition, the outbreak of hostilities against the North American colonists brought forward the first large-scale and sustained public criticism of the use of military force as an instrument of imperial politics. Armed actions on the part of the government were condemned by anti-war activists, who explained the disruption of the bonds with the American colonists as the result of the tyrannical nature of Britain's imperial project.

Although anti-war campaigners used the notion of manly patriotism to define the colonists' right to resist the government, the attack on imperialist practices also challenged the gendered nature of this notion. Authoritarian imperial rule and the American

conflict were associated with the worst side of masculinity and, thus, some writers advocated the adoption of feminine values at a national level because the 'weakness of women hath not ushered in such a flood of calamities, as these virtues of men'[61].

However, opposition to territorial expansion was supported by only a minority of the population, mainly among intellectuals. Authors such as Richard Price and Josiah Tucker gave public resonance to anti-imperialist attitudes that associated territorial expansion with luxury and corruption. Hume agreed with Adam Smith's defence of an empire based on the superiority of British trade and manufactures rather than on territorial acquisition[62]. Historical examples such as imperial Rome became more relevant than ever since now it was widely perceived that Britain ran the risk of suffering from the same moral and civic decline that had been the consequence of Roman imperial expansion. Up to this moment, comparisons between Rome and Britain had been common but an identification between their fortunes had been prevented by the belief that the British empire, unlike the Roman, was guided by libertarian and benevolent principles.

Nevertheless, even if the American War challenged the previous vision of the empire as free and virtuous, founded on consent, liberty, civilisation and prosperity, after the end of the conflict anti-imperialist attitudes were overcome by the conviction that the imperial project should be carried forward and proceed upon more disciplinary and authoritarian policies. The loss of the

---

61 *Newcastle Weekly Magazine* (1776), quoted in Wilson, *The Sense of the People*, p. 276.

62 See Landsman, 'The Provinces and the Empire', pp. 264-265.

American colonies encouraged a growing awareness of the relevance of imperial possessions for Britain's prosperity and international standing and well-defined and firm imperial policies were demanded by the public. This move towards a more authoritarian administration of the empire was encouraged by the fact that it was increasingly difficult to assimilate imperial subjects to the British population. After the American War, the imperial effort turned to India and the East, whose peoples and landscape were undoubtedly alien, and from a model that encouraged settlement in overseas possessions to a pattern based on the dominion of the indigenous population. The position of the supporters of the government during the American War, who believed that the conflict had derived from a conciliatory and bland vision of empire, eventually prevailed.

INTEGRATION, IMPROVEMENT AND NOTIONS OF IDENTITY IN EIGHTEENTH CENTURY SCOTLAND

During the eighteenth century Scotland came to be gradually recognised as a valuable and equal member of the nation, due to its deeper involvement in commercial and imperial ventures and to the prominent role of the Scots in the British army. At the same time, this process was encouraged from Scotland, which promoted anglicisation and demanded further integration within the new framework provided by the Treaty of the Union. However, the incorporation of Scotland into a more united nation cannot be merely seen as the assimilation of the northern part of the island into the cultural and political core of Englishness.

Scotland participated actively in the formation and consolidation of a more inclusive notion of national identity not only by intervening in the key processes upon which it was defined (empire, war, commerce) but also by transforming the assumptions which supported narrow definitions of nationhood and providing a more comprehensive ground upon which Britishness could be sustained. Even if by the end of the century this process had rendered positive outcomes, such as the consolidation of Britain as a more united nation and the decided identification of the Scots with the fortunes of the state, integration provoked tensions such as the recurrent outbursts of Scotophobia southward of the border and the eruptions of Scottish pride in the north.

North Britishness and the Mentality of Emulation

Scottish responses to the union were varied and often contradictory. The immediate reactions were marked by hostility. There was a widespread feeling that Scotland had forsaken its independence in exchange for provincial subordination and no substantial economic gain. Unremitting economic depression and the disappointment about the initial outcome of the union spurred political unrest and dangers of rebellion, which became reality in the Jacobite uprising of 1745. However, its prompt suppression and the lack of effective support offered to the rebels by most part of the Scottish population indicate that the union had already gathered significant support and acceptance[63]. Even if distrust and

[63] On the Scottish reactions to the Jacobite rebellion see Colley, *Britons*, pp. 83-85. On Scottish first responses to the Union see Eric Richards, 'Scotland and the Uses of the Atlantic Empire', in Bernard Bailyn and Philip D. Morgan (eds.),

resentment persisted, hostility towards the union was surpassed by an overall recognition of the benefits of integration.

Several factors had smoothed the transition towards a wider acceptance of the union. The court had moved from Edinburgh in 1603 and the partnership between the two kingdoms had already created dependencies and connexions. After the Treaty, Scotland retained a status of semi-autonomy which lessened anxieties about the destruction of Scotland's identity. Scotland's key institutions (the Church, the law system and the university) remained unaffected while the ruling elite maintained its links with Scotland since its larger part could not afford the cost of attending the Parliament sessions in London. In front of the difficulties to deal with the intricate Scottish politics, London left most of its new responsibilities in the hands of a 'northern manager', thus preventing an invasion of English officials and preserving the existing patronage networks that later on would prove essential for the Scots to move southward. Edinburgh retained its position as a centre of culture, religion and law and became a magnet for the gentry and the expanding Scottish professional class, for whom the city was the main point of reference whether for employment, education or polite sociability. As a result, Edinburgh served as a catalyst to the fruitful relation between the landed and the

---

Strangers within the Realm. Cultural Margins of the First British Empire (Chapel Hill & London, 1991), pp. 67-114 and Kidd, 'North Britishness'.

intellectual elite, which were joined in their commitment to promote improvement and modernisation[64].

However, as Colin Kidd has remarked, the preservation of significant levels of autonomy was not at the forefront of Scottish ambitions. By contrast, the main goal of the promoters of the union consisted on the economic and political benefits that only full integration could grant. The resulting degrees of semi-autonomy eased the path towards absorption within the English state, making it more palatable for those who feared the destruction of Scottish distinctiveness. They also enabled the development of a North British ideology of emulation and anglicisation, encouraging further integration[65].

The interaction between Scotland and the wider British world arose tensions about how Scottish identity was to be defined and integrated within Britain. In this respect, Scottish opinion towards England fluctuated from hostility to admiration. Yet, different dynamics can be perceived in the diverse spheres of Scottish life, since assimilation was encouraged in some areas while fiercely resisted in others, such as religious organisation. The overall outcome of this process was the emergence of a notion of identity which has been called North Britishness, a term which seeks to emphasise the anglocentric pull of Scottish responses to the union while pointing out their complex nature. Although retaining an emotive attachment to the ideal and memory of a Scottish nation,

---

[64] See Richards, 'Scotland and the Uses' and N. T. Phillipson, 'Towards a Definition of the Scottish Enlightenment', in David Williams Paul Fritz (ed.), *City and Society in the Eighteenth Century* (Toronto, 1973), pp. 125-147.

[65] See Kidd, 'North Britishness', p. 364.

Scotland predominantly showed an orientation towards England, based on a gradual identification with its institutions and the determination to match English political and economic achievements[66].

At the same time, the Scots' consciousness of their backwardness, poverty and provinciality lingered throughout the century and generated a 'mentality of emulation' that has been defined as a 'catching-up ideology of imitation and self-improvement that, though it may have predated the union, became more urgent by the 1720s'[67]. Under this mentality, the Scots showed a firm determination to attain the standards set by London and England, and to take advantage of the opportunities now available beyond Scotland. Thus, under the mentality of emulation which characterised eighteenth century Scotland, a sense of North British identity gradually took shape; both developments rested on a steady process of anglicisation and were the product of a widespread commitment to modernisation and improvement[68].

A Collective Commitment to Improvement

Before 1707 there was a growing feeling among the Scottish elite that the union with England was essential for the modernisation and development of the country. Bad harvests and declining markets resulted in the great famine of 1690, which reinforced gloomy perceptions of Scotland's economic situation. Being formally excluded from English colonial possessions,

[66] See Kidd, 'North Britishness'.

[67] Richards, 'Scotland and the Uses', p. 84.

[68] Kidd, 'North Britishness'.

Scotland had few possibilities of engaging in the profitable overseas trade and no means to provide opportunities of colonial settlement for its growing and impoverished population. The failure of the plans to implement a commercial network with North America in the last decades of the seventeenth century fostered claims for the union with England among the men of trade who were eager to access the lucrative American markets. These claims were echoed by the landed elite, who was willing to enlarge their narrow prospects in Scotland and find places abroad for their younger sons[69].

Yet, the aristocracy was primarily inclined towards integration due to its commitment to economic improvement and general progress. The 'cult of commerce', which linked trade with general prosperity and advancement, had reached Scotland, fostering existing perceptions of economic depression and emphasising the importance of trade within the wider scheme of improvement which the overwhelmingly backwardness of Scotland required. The union with England was therefore advocated not only as the solution for Scotland's exclusion from the international trading networks but also as the best means to introduce the country into the path towards modernity, eroding its feudal ties, expanding its stagnated agriculture and joining the circles of polite and learned culture. Even if the Scottish elite was concerned about its own and the nation's loss of independence that the union involved, they

[69] See Richards, 'Scotland and the Uses'.

were resolved to support it as a means of galvanising the nation into economic improvement[70].

Aristocratic concerns about backwardness and improvement were shared by the upward sections of Scottish society, where close connections linked the mercantile, the intellectual and the landed elite. They shared a similar cultural background, provided by the Scottish universities, and mixed together in the limited venues for polite intercourse available in Edinburgh and Glasgow. In addition, the narrow prospects and limited resources of the Scottish aristocracy pushed members of the gentry into commercial ventures and professional careers and lessened their reluctance to marry beyond the circle of noble families. Scottish mercantile classes benefited from the pull towards modernisation which was primarily led by the landed and intellectual elite. The landed elite eagerly assumed the ethos of advancement elaborated by the literati, acting as the patrons of the intellectual elite, endeavouring to improve their states and promoting economic growth in conjunction with professional and mercantile groups. Especially remarkable was the role of the lesser nobility who, bereft of political function, absorbed the ideology of improvement as their social responsibility, joining the intellectual elite in learning associations and supporting institutions for the promotion economic development[71].

---

[70] Richards, 'Scotland and the Uses', pp. 72, 80 and Phillipson, 'Towards a Definition of the Scottish Enlightenment'.

[71] See Phillipson, 'Towards a Definition of the Scottish Enlightenment' and Richards, 'Scotland and the Uses'.

At the same time, the authors of the Scottish Enlightenment strengthened the commitment to modernisation shown by the landowning classes[72]. They endowed with theoretical lustre the aristocratic spirit of renovation which, in addition, was turned by the literati into the foundation of the role of the landed elite as the legitimate leaders of the community. Thus the literati reinforced aristocratic authority which was threatened by the disruption of the bonds of the moral economy caused by modernisation. Like the landed elite, the Scottish intellectuals supported the union as the best means to achieve economic growth and avoid the social, political and religious unrest that had characterised the previous century. For the Scottish literati, faction and strife in the body politic was particularly distressing since they believed that apart form its negative social and political implications it hindered the intellectual endeavours they were committed to. The union, thus, was welcomed as the best means to appease the conflicts that had plagued Scotland in the previous century, and create an environment favourable for the cultural life[73]. Due to the practical nature of the Scottish Enlightenment, economic growth emerged as an important intellectual concern. The Scottish authors believed that cultural advancement was related to economic progress and devoted much of their theoretical work to explore these connections. The Scottish Enlightenment's belief in the beneficial interconnections between economic and general improvement could be exemplified in Adam Smith's words:

---

[72] See Phillipson, 'Towards a Definition of the Scottish Enlightenment' and Richards, 'Scotland and the Uses'.

[73] See Pocock, 'Hume and the American Revolution'.

> the same age which produces great philosophers and politicians, renowned generals and poets, usually abounds with skilful weavers and ship carpenters… The spirit of this age affects all the arts; and the minds of men, being once roused from their lethargy, and put into a fermentation, turn themselves on all sides and carry improvements into every art and science[74].

Yet, the widespread psychology of improvement which lay at the heart of the pull towards the union was characterised by a powerful orientation towards English political, economic and institutional models. Scottish reformers and advocates of the union believed that Scotland's poor economic situation was the product of the very features of Scottish reality. Economic improvement would follow once the persistent feudalist structures of Scottish society were eroded and substituted by English agricultural and commercial models. Similarly, Scottish aristocratic and political structures were unfavourably compared with England's. English patrician aristocracy was considered to be less oppressive than its Scottish counterpart while Scottish feudal institutions, internal conflicts and Jacobite adhesions were deemed a constraint for innovation. While Scottish political traditions and unicameral Parliament were associated with despotism and lack of liberty, English constitutional arrangements were praised as the foundation of its prosperity. Anglicisation was portrayed as the

---

[74] Quoted in Richards, 'Scotland and the Uses', p. 82. On these issues, see John Dwyer, 'Clio and Ethics: Practical Morality in Enlightened Scotland', *The Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation*, 30, (1989), John Dwyer, *Virtuous Discourse: Sensibility and Community in Eighteenth Century Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1987), Phillipson, 'Towards a Definition of the Scottish Enlightenment', Richards, 'Scotland and the Uses' and Richard L. Sher, *Church and University in the Scottish Enlightenment* (Edinburgh, 1985).

pathway towards political freedom and economic growth and thus, equated to patriotism and the pursuit of the common good[75].

Anglicising Scotland

During the eighteenth century, the move towards anglicisation could be perceived in different spheres of Scottish life, blended with the ideology of reform and improvement. Economically, Scottish success was grounded on the adoption of English techniques, which increased agricultural and industrial productivity, and the employment of the existing trading networks and practices that had ensured English dominance of the international markets[76]. In cultural terms, London periodicals such as the *Spectator* and the *Tatler* became enormously popular in Scotland and provided cultural models which were imitated by the gentry, the intellectuals and the professionals in their quest for respectability and up to date refinement. In terms of language, Scottish dialects and particularities were eroded in favour of the use of English which was deemed the language of learning, culture and civilisation. The Scots anglicised their names and devoted their energies to the expurgation of scotticisms from their speech and the polishing of their accent. In addition, the models of literary expression favoured by the Scottish writers were not indigenous but rooted in the contemporary models of polite literature[77].

The landed elite and the intellectual elite, the main supporters of the union, were also the leaders of the pull towards

[75] Kidd, 'North Britishness'.

[76] Kidd, 'North Britishness'.

[77] Kidd, 'North Britishness', Richards, 'Scotland and the Uses', p. 86.

anglicisation. The landed elite promoted English based types of socialisation and polite culture and assumed the lifestyle and consumption patterns set by their English peers. They played a key role in the introduction of English techniques in agricultural and industrial activities. As the century went by, and their fortunes increased, they gradually moved to London. Eventually, the drive towards assimilation proved fruitful for the Scottish landed elite. It had enabled their transition from a provincial role within the marginal boundaries of Scotland to effective involvement in Westminster politics where they exerted influence at a national level[78].

Even if by mid-century the success of the Scottish universities had generated expressions of pride, the Scottish literati frequently complained about their narrow prospects within their homeland and looked at London as the proper place where to promote their careers and sanction their claims for intellectual recognition. Accordingly, Hume stated: 'Scotland is too a narrow place for me' and remarked 'London is the Capital of my own country'[79]. The authors of the Scottish Enlightenment were aware that in order to fulfil their southward ambitions they needed a perfect command of written and spoken English. Therefore, the best minds of the Scottish Enlightenment who prided themselves on the achievements of the Scottish men of letters and universities, strived at the same time to polish their accents and writing from any hint of scotticisms. Hume, for instance, drew a list of

[78] Richards, 'Scotland and the Uses'.

[79] Quoted in Richards, 'Scotland and the Uses', p. 90.

scottiscims to be avoided and favoured Eton over Edinburgh for his nephew's schooling[80].

The Scottish literati praised in their works the achievements of English constitutionalism. In their accounts of human progress towards civilisation, political liberties, civil rights and parliamentary order were considered defining traits of advanced societies. The literati's appreciation of the English political model was soon adopted by the Scottish society, and thus, for some, political modernisation was the most important benefit of integration. Consequently, as soon as 1735, *The Thistle* commented, 'by the union the trade of England and of the English colonies was opened to us: But this is a trifling advantage in comparison with another, that thereby we had communicated to us their inestimable constitution'[81].

Most importantly, the authors of the Scottish Enlightenment reinforced the anglocentric bias of eighteenth century Scotland by giving it a theoretical foundation. Most of them were sincerely committed to the North British mentality. They carried on the critique of the tenets of Scottish traditional nationalism which was initiated towards the end of the seventeenth century. By the 1690s, among the advocates of the union, the viability of an independent Scotland was called into question. Some unionists such as George Mackenzie, earl of Cromarty, believed that the Scottish nation was a medieval product which, in modern times, was no longer of use

---

[80] See Janet Adam Smith, 'Some Eighteenth Century Ideas of Scotland', in N. T. Phillipson and Rosalind Mitchison (eds.), *Scotland in the Age of Improvement* (Edinburgh, 1970), pp. 107-124, pp. 110-111.

[81] Quoted in Kidd, 'North Britishness', p. 371.

since, due to its feudalist traits and modest dimensions, Scotland would be unable to compete with the imperial superpowers of Western Europe. As a result, prior to the union, the role of Scottish history as the basis for a patriotic ideology was eroded, softening the loss of autonomy that the union involved. The Scottish Enlightenment reinforced this trend in its analysis of the evolution of society. On the one hand, it reinforced the view of independent Scotland as an anachronism by associating its traits with those of societies which preceded modernity. On the other hand, the Scottish authors deconstructed the phenomenon of patriotism, particularly in its most irrational and emotional aspects. They noted that communal identities were rooted in the usefulness of association in order to survive in hostile environments and achieve economic and social viability. In addition, the Scots pointed out the contingency and undignified nature of sentiments of patriotism. They changed through time, as tribal and political units rise and fall, and had their origin in a somehow primitive tendency to herd together in front of the enemy[82].

The Scottish literati, like the critiques of Scottish traditional patriotism of the late seventeenth century, rejected the notion of liberty as conceptualised by the advocates of the Scottish nationhood. The Scottish anti-unionists focused on the defence of liberty, understood as fierce resistance to annexation, recalling how their forefathers had fought against the English invaders. By contrast, for the advocates of the union, such a vindication of Scottish liberties meant isolation in a northern backwater. The pro-

[82] See Kidd, 'North Britishness'.

unionists confronted this view with a critique of the despotic nature of the Scottish nobility and traditional institutions and preferred to focus on economic improvement and commercial freedom. Similarly, the figures of the Scottish Enlightenment emphasised that true liberty entailed civil liberties, political rights and parliamentary constitutionalism. English constitutional arrangements were celebrated by the Scottish intellectual elite who, quite significantly, chose to devote themselves to the analysis of English rather than Scottish history. English institutions and laws were therefore presented as the touchstones of the prospective Scottish path towards civil liberty and political modernisation.

Scottish conjectural history traced the evolution of mankind from savagery towards a civilised stage that was clearly associated with the features of English society and institutions. By associating moral virtue and progress with the main characteristics of current English society (civil liberties, commercial prosperity and politeness) Scottish conjectural history involved an implicit rejection of the traditional traits of Scottish society, such as rusticity, economic backwardness and internal division. At the same time, the literati established a significant temporal distance between England and Scotland, affirming that the former represented the vanguard of advancement while the latter lingered a long way behind, under the constraints of feudal-like institutions and far away from commercialisation and political liberties. Thus, Scottish intellectual endeavours were charged with a powerful political resonance, reinforcing the view that Scotland's way

towards progress depended on the success of the union and on further anglicisation[83].

Besides, the Scottish Enlightenment contributed to the diffusion and popularisation of current English political discourses through the Scottish body politic. They showed an intellectual fascination for England's constitution and laws, which became an important object of study among the Scottish intellectuals. Hume, for instance, praised the principle of balance, which was the basis of English political order, because it encouraged the development of a moral and civic polity and was the best means of preventing corruption[84]. Clubs, associations and debating societies held sessions devoted to the discussion of issues of civil liberty. Moreover, the vocabulary of English politics was widely used by the Scots to demand further integration and full parity with its English neighbours. Notions of civil liberty and political rights were often the implicit spur to outbursts of local pride, when it was perceived that London had forsaken the desired parity promised by the union. In addition, Scotland adopted the re-elaboration of the English political tradition made by the extra parliamentary politics. Like their English counterparts, the Scots demanded more participation and expressed their frustration when they were relegated to a marginal position.

---

[83] See Kidd, 'North Britishness'.

[84] See Pocock, 'Hume and the American Revolution'.

The Limits of Improvement

In geographical terms, the process of anglicisation ran parallel to a growing detachment from the features of Highland culture and society. During the eighteenth century the Lowland/Highland division that cut across the country persisted and grew deeper. As the union confronted the Scots with English models against which self-definitions should be negotiated, the Highlands came to represent the features of Scottish reality which were rejected by the advocates of modernisation, emerging as a negative referent against which Scottish identity should be defined. Thus, processes of identity formation in Scotland, as in England, involved a confrontation with a negative 'other' within against which self-definitions were negotiated and affirmed[85].

Unaffected by the Scottish awakening, the Highlands remained an internal frontier and a challenge to the schemes of improvement which rendered their effects mostly in the polite, urban and learned Lowlands. Isolated by their mountainous landscape, non-existent or poor communications, and low urbanisation, the Highlands had retained their long-standing traditions and old economic activities. Their impoverished peasantry was bound by strong local and clannish loyalties and subjected to the unrestrained authority of the landowners. In the eyes of many, the Highlands was a land detained in the Middle Ages, the home of the last remnants of witchcraft and witch hunting, Gaelic civilisation, barbaric violence and old fashioned

[85] See Richards, 'Scotland and the Uses' pp. 80-81. On Hume's views on the Highlands, see Pocock, 'Hume and the American Revolution'.

notions of honour, pride and communal organisation. In tune with the frequent complaints by the Kirk about the difficulty of organising and disciplining religious life in their poorest areas, Highlanders were often depicted as unchristian barbarians who could be even compared to the indigenous and uncivilised populations of Africa or America. Therefore, for the Lowlanders, the Highlanders were an alien and, after the Jacobite uprising of the '45, threatening people who were despised in Edinburgh in the same way in which Scots were mocked in London[86].

In the light of the stark contradiction between the Highlands and the Lowlands, the Scottish move towards anglicisation can be also understood as a desire of detachment from the Highlands, a conscious rejection of their backward features which seemed to thwart all attempts of modernisation. Moreover, Highlander stereotypes hindered the success of the Scots who moved to London in search of places and opportunities, since the frequent outbursts of anti-Scottish feelings chose the Highlander as a target of derision and hostility. Thus, the traits of Englishness more eagerly imitated by the Lowlander leaders of the Scottish revival were precisely those which set clear boundaries with their Highlander neighbours: use of English as opposed to Gaelic dialects, economic modernisation against economic backwardness, polite intercourse as opposed to the ancient ties of clanship, engagement in a new world of opportunities as confronted with Highlander isolation.

---

[86] See Richards, 'Scotland and the Uses', pp. 80-81.

The Margins of the North British Identity

By mid-century, the North British mentality was already well rooted in the minds of the Scots, especially among their social and intellectual leaders. Even so, a sense of distinctive Scottish identity showed a remarkable resilience. Even if North Britishness had been keenly adopted in many areas of Scottish life, English influence was rejected in many others. Although English models were echoed by Scottish political thought and economic schemes, there were other fields in which Scottish particularities were keenly protected. Regarding religion, the Scots showed a deep commitment to Scottish religious identity and to the preservation of the traditions of the Kirk. At the same time, the Scots viewed certain features of English success with reluctance. London was seen under an unfavourable light. The simplicity of Scotland's features was depicted as the bulwark of morality, religion and honesty, and favourably compared to London's luxurious lifestyles, frivolous fashions and corrupted politics. Thus, the Scottish nobility was urged not to settle in London lest they lose the robust and pious customs of their homeland and fall under the pernicious influence of the capital[87].

In addition, the outbursts of anti-Caledonian feelings aroused resentment among the Scots, especially among those who sought better career prospects southwards. Complaints directed against English unwillingness to accept the Scots as equal partners can be found in Hume and Carlyle's texts. They lamented the excessive prominence of English figures in the Scottish political scene,

[87] See Kidd, 'North Britishness' and Sher, *Church and University*.

criticised Westminster's scarce provision for the Church of Scotland, as compared with the Anglican Church, and rejected English accusations of backwardness and provincialism. Even if they exerted themselves to get a perfect command of English, a sense that anglicisation of tongue and pen involved some loss can be perceived in some of the Scottish literati such as Hume or Robertson. The success of Scottish universities and intellectuality was frequently recalled by the Scots in order to assert Scotland's superiority over England. They echoed the triumphs of Scottish men of letters and plays in London and rejoiced in Scotland's renown among the circles of polite culture, in ways which involved a proud affirmation of their distinctive identity as Scots. In Hume words:

> is it not strange that, at a time when we have lost our Princes, our Parliaments, our independent Government, even the Presence of our chief Nobility, are unhappy, in our Accent & Pronunciation, speak a very corrupt Dialect of the Tongue which we make use of; is it not strange, I say, that, in these Circumstances, we shou'd really be the People most distinguish'd for Literature in Europe?[88]

As the authors of the Scottish Enlightenment exemplify, the persistence of a Scottish distinctive identity was compatible with a commitment with the tenets of North Britishness and a fierce defence of the benefits of the union. Such was the case of Robert Carlyle, David Hume and William Robertson, eminent figure within the Kirk and head of Edinburgh University. However, even if feelings of Scottish pride often ran parallel to the pull towards

[88] Quote in Smith, 'Some Eighteenth Century Ideas of Scotland', p. 110.

anglicisation, they could also be expressed in other ways and in contradiction with a primary attachment to the fortunes of Britain.

James Boswell is a good example of the latter position. He was committed to a notion of Scottish identity that involved an open rejection of the union with England. Scotland's past and glories rather than its present and future prospects within the wider world provided the framework of his conception of Scottish identity. For him, the union constituted an unbearable betrayal of Scottish true spirit, independence and love of liberty. Unlike the Scottish literati, who praised these values, arguing however that in the present time they would be better protected within the framework of English constitutionalism, for Boswell a compromise between integration and the essence of Scotland was not possible. Thus he bitterly resented the inequalities that resulted from the union and the scorn with which the Scots were frequently welcomed in the south. This was a more metaphysical, more emotional and less rational notion of identity, rooted in the ideas of the former opponents to the union and endowed with a deep longing of Scottish past achievements and glories. Although this vision had little resonance in the eighteenth century, it contained many of the elements which, with the advent of romantic notions of identity and images of the past, will become popular in the following century[89].

Concern about Scottish past and customs could be expressed in more conciliatory terms. This is the case of Allan Ramsay, Robert Burns and Robert Ferguson. These authors chose the Scots

[89] Smith, 'Some Eighteenth Century Ideas of Scotland'.

for their writings and turned to the Scottish traditions and past as sources of literary inspiration. However, their vision of Scotland was not nostalgic or rooted in the past, as in Boswell's case. They differentiated between high culture, marked by integration, and everyday life, where Scottish traditional customs should have a continuation. Although complaints about Scotland's unequal position within the Union often appear in their writings, the union was not rejected. Like Hume and Carlyle they were concerned with fostering improvement and a better future for Scotland. Nevertheless, unlike Hume and Carlyle, who were more concerned with practical and political issues, they endowed their literary pursuits with a patriotic endeavour. While the former were devoted to issues of government, manners and civic improvement, Burns and Ramsay focused on the defence of ways of living and feeling identified with Scotttishness, which had their finest expression in Scottish folklore and literary traditions. For them the true spirit of Scotland did not reside on its political structures and thus the loss of independence that the union implied could be palliated through the preservation of the Scottish ancient literary forms, in which the true soul of Scotland rested[90].

By 1750 the union had evidently rendered benefits, fostering widespread acceptance of the integration and supporting the English orientation of North British feelings. The status of Scotland within Britain and the world had changed spectacularly. Scottish traders had successfully engaged in overseas commercial

[90] Smith, 'Some Eighteenth Century Ideas of Scotland'.

networks while Scottish agriculture and manufactures were among the leading examples of British economic dynamism. Its professionals permeated public services and imperial administration, Scottish physicians, engineers, architects and writers were renowned in London and the colonies, while its migrants formed the bulk of British settlements abroad. In spite of the Jacobite eruptions and recurrent food riots, social unrest and religious disputes had decreased considerably. The climate of religious toleration allowed a more open sphere for intellectual discussion both within the Kirk and the university. In these conditions, the Scottish universities emerged as leading centres of learning within England and Europe and Scottish thinkers formed one of the finest branches of the Enlightenment movement, exerting its influence beyond the limits of Britain[91].

However, Scotland's response to these new opportunities was also determined by processes rooted in pre-union circumstances. The Scots had a long experience of migration, often in search of mercenary employment in the Continent or to settle in America as a result of religious conflict or labour demand. Signs of economic and cultural resurgence can be found in the last decades of the seventeenth century, which suggest that these processes were already on their way before the union. The period between 1670 and 1707 was marked by an increasing religious tolerance and a reorganisation of the university system which introduced scientific principles and methods. Regarding economic activities, the turn of the century witnessed important transformations in agriculture, the

[91] See Richards, 'Scotland and the Uses' and Colley, *Britons*, p. 123.

consolidation of an influential mercantile class and the diversification and development of the financial system. Similarly, the ethos of improvement which characterised the Scottish elite can be traced back before 1707 while the anti-feudalist critique of Scottish structures dated from the 1690s[92].

Whether the union acted as the main catalyst for modernisation or it was primarily due to trends already at work in Scotland, the union certainly opened new horizons for the energies of the Scots which flowed *en masse* to the south and joined imperial and commercial ventures in order to vindicate their status as equal partners within Britain and affirm the vitality of Scotland beyond its boundaries.

The Scottish Takeover of Britain

Scotland's energies were not contained within its boundaries but extended throughout British territory, both within the island and abroad. The successful and extensive move forwards of the Scots into spheres of activity that until this moment had been closed to them underlines that the process of anglicisation which followed the union ran parallel to a no less powerful Scottish influence over the metropolis which reversed the fears of cultural assimilation that followed 1707. Migration, trade, empire and war were used by the Scots to affirm their strength, state their claims to

[92] See Richards, 'Scotland and the Uses', pp. 77-79.

genuine partnership and endow with real meaning the idea of a united kingdom[93].

The flow of Scots towards England had started shortly after the union but then it was limited in number and restricted to a few areas. However, this move increased and became more diversified in time, as more and more Scots moved southwards in search of profitable uses for their skills and to fulfil their expectations of wealth and status, which were curtailed within the narrow boundaries of their motherland. The intellectuals went to the capital seeking recognition and the dynamism of London's cultural life. Lawyers, doctors and architects yielded to the lure of London, attracted by the possibilities offered by England's growing prosperity and urbanisation, which in turn had increased the demand of competent professionals.

Territorial expansion proved particularly beneficial for the Scots since the empire provided their main source employment whether in the enlarged imperial administration or in the growing army. In spite of the economic growth, the Scots (both high and low) were still poorer than the English and therefore more willing to earn their livelihood abroad. Besides, the great influx of Scots into the regiments of the British army was facilitated by a long tradition of mercenary service abroad. Narrower opportunities also meant that the sons of the Scottish landowners regarded imperial posts as a viable occupation, unlike their English peers who still

[93] See Colley, *Britons*, pp. 117-132. and Richards, 'Scotland and the Uses', pp. 87-91.

looked at overseas appointments with contempt. As a result, by 1753 the Scots amounted to a quarter of all regimental officers[94].

The Scots made good use of patronage networks and of the influence of prominent political figures such as Lord Bute to advance their numbers and rank within the imperial apparatus. A good example of this infiltration can be found in the East India Company. Searching for opportunities of rapid enrichment and supported by a network of Scottish connections within the Company's administrative hierarchy in London, the Scots soon were a very high proportion within the areas of service which required a gentry background[95]. In addition, Scots from diverse social backgrounds moved to India to undertake private commercial ventures or, within the Company, to serve as doctors, surgeons, lawyers or soldiers. Thus, in 1772 Scots in the Company represented one in nine of its civil servants, one in eleven of its common soldiers and one in three of its officers[96].

Regarding political life and high bureaucracy, the process of infiltration was slower, except for the diplomatic service which was also rejected by English landed families[97]. Only after the 1780s the political profits perceived by the Scottish political elite as a

---

94 Richards, 'Scotland and the Uses', p. 88. See also Colley, *Britons*, p. 128-129.

95 This profitable set of connections can be exemplified by the figure of Henry Dundas, who took charge of the India Board of Control and made of it a great source of patronage for his fellow Scots in the 1780s and after. See Richards, 'Scotland and the Uses', p. 89 and Bowen, *Elites, Enterprise*, p. 165.

96 Richards, 'Scotland and the Uses', p. 90. The figures offered by Bowen for the zone of Bengal are even more striking: between 1775 and 1785, 45% of those appointed as writers, 49% of those given cadetships, 60% of those licensed as free merchants and 52% of those who became assistant surgeons were Scots. See Bowen, *Elites, Enterprise*, p. 165.

97 Richards, 'Scotland and the Uses', p. 89.

consequence of the union were noticeably increased, in the form of official posts, valuable contracts and state salaries[98]. Quite significantly, before that decade, the only Scot who reached major political resonance was Lord Bute who paid for this breach of the English monopoly of high politics by becoming the target of widespread hostility and criticisms.

However, self-improvement was not the only force that pushed the Scots into Britain and turned them into key agents of empire building. It was also a means of giving the union an effective content, redressing the balance between Scotland and England and proving their parity with their southern neighbours. By becoming prominent in imperial, commercial and military activities, the Scots were actually taking hold of the pillars upon which exclusive notions of Englishness had been forged, turning them to their own benefit and endowing them with more inclusive connotations.

Not surprisingly the Scots, unlike their English counterparts, were especially concerned with the vindication of a common British identity in order to support their right to participate of the benefits of imperial expansion and commercial prosperity on an equal footing. The whole process can be summarised in the words of a Scot who, in response to English hostility, affirmed: 'we are both Englishmen; that is, true British subjects, entitled to every emolument and advantage that our happy constitution can bestow'[99]. By defining themselves as British and imitating the most

---

[98] See Colley, *Britons*, p. 126.

[99] Quoted in Richards, 'Scotland and the Uses', p. 86.

salient features of English culture, the Scots also sought to counteract the outbursts of anti-Caledonian feelings. Although Scotophobia was rooted in the traditional hostility between both countries and on fears of Jacobite invasions, it mounted in the 1760s and 1770s as a reaction against the increasing infiltration of Scots in every sphere of activity. Thus, one of the targets of anti-Scottish campaigns was the careerist, the pushy but somehow unpolished Scot who pursued self-promotion in the core of the metropolis[100].

The infiltration of the Scots within Britain could no longer be avoided. Imperial expansion demanded an enlarged army to secure territorial possessions and settlers to populate the new acquisitions and push forward colonial boundaries. Scotland's impoverished peasantry provided the manpower required for both tasks. In addition, the English political elite promoted the enlistment of Scottish Highlanders in the army. They were highly valued as soldiers due to their tradition of mercenary service abroad, deep-seated loyalties and respect for authority. Military service was also deemed as the best means to turn Highlander loyalties from the Jacobite cause to the Hanoverian order and foster the assimilation of the Highlands. Eventually, Scotland's loyalty to the Union and manpower had to be rewarded in some way, especially to the landed and professional classes who, having actively advocated the benefits of integration, got access to the opportunities that lay on the south. Thus, as Linda Colley has argued, 'this was to be the

[100] See Colley, *Britons*, p. 121-123 and Richards, 'Scotland and the Uses', p. 98-101.

other side of forcible integration: allowing Scots to compete on a wider scale and on more favourably terms than ever before'[101]

The Scots and America

After the union, Scotland established fruitful relations with the colonial possessions of North America which now were fully open to settlement, and intellectual and commercial exchange. During the eighteenth century, America became an important concern for the Scots. American connections were used as powerful argument by the advocates of the union and, afterwards, were considered essential in order to advance the case for equality among the Union. Access to the transatlantic territories had eased the pressures derived from population growth while overseas commercial activities had encouraged the expansion of the coastal towns and spurred trade and manufactures[102].

Down the social scale, the empire provided opportunities for the less well-off, who migrated *en masse* to the British possessions in North America. This flow reached its peak between 1760 and 1775 when 20.000 Scots are thought to have left for America[103]. Driven by population growth, poverty and increasing competition for land, many Highlanders went to America to escape their impoverished situation and also as a response to the attempts of the landowners to enlarge their hold over the dependent peasantry. They were probably encouraged by the transformation of their

[101] Colley, *Britons*, p. 120.

[102] See Bowen, *Elites, Enterprise* and Richards, 'Scotland and the Uses', p. 91-98 and Landsman, 'The Provinces and the Empire'.

[103] Bowen, *Elites, Enterprise*, p. 157.

traditions and values, the weakening of the Celtic language and the loss of the bonds of the moral economy, all of which was fostered both by London and by the Scottish landed elite. Thus, once in America, they reproduced their economic and cultural patterns. They settled mostly in the countryside and engaged in farming and cattle raising while retaining their costume and language. Even the Highlander aristocracy sought better conditions in overseas territories, using their patriarchal authority to recruit regiments which joined the British army abroad[104].

By contrast, Lowlanders left in more limited numbers for they wanted to advance their fortunes rather than get away from economic hardships. They settled mainly in urban communities and, while some of them established themselves as artisans, many others prospered and attained a significant presence in key areas of colonial life such as official employment, colonial administration and, primarily, commerce. Commercial activities proved to be especially fruitful for the Scots, who thrived on transatlantic exchanges and dominated some of its main sectors such as the tobacco trade. Lowlanders in America had a decisive role in Scottish commercial success; they became linkmen between the colonial economy and the prosperous merchants of Glasgow[105].

Scotland exerted a powerful influence over American cultural life. Native Scots lectured in American academies and colleges while Americans went to Scotland to receive high education, attracted by the reputation of the Scottish universities. Scots and

---

[104] See Richards, 'Scotland and the Uses', pp. 92-95.

[105] See Richards, 'Scotland and the Uses', pp. 93-96, pp. 95-99 and Colley, *Britons*, pp. 138-142.

Scottish trained clergymen could be found preaching in countless congregations and helping to establish educational institutions. At the same time, American priests kept close contacts with their Scottish counterparts. The connexions between America and the popular party of the Church of Scotland were especially remarkable. They saw America as a new and unspoiled world, far from the immorality and corruption of Europe, a land where they could establish a better society and follow God's principles. Looking for respect and influence – which in Scotland was denied to them due to the rule of the moderates within the Kirk – they migrated to America and played a key role in the development of institutions of learning, either through direct involvement in teaching or by using their networks in Scotland to get financial resources. Scottish Episcopalians, on their part, went to America driven by educational concerns and they set up schools and missions for the education and indoctrination of the Indians[106].

Medicine strengthened the bonds between Scotland and America. An important number of Scottish physicians settled in America before the revolution and Edinburgh received a growing number of American students in its medical school. Besides becoming prominent figures in their communities, Scottish doctors served as cultural links between their motherland and the colony. They showed a keen interest for American geography, natural life and indigenous population and their writings provided

[106] See Roger L. Emerson, 'The Scottish Literati and America, 1680-1800', in Ned C. Landsman (ed.), *Nation and Province in the First British Empire* (London: Lewisburg, 2007), pp. 183-220, Landsman, 'The Provinces and the Empire' pp. 196-204. On the moderate party of the Church of Scotland in this period, see Sher, *Church and University*.

valuable information for the authors of the Scottish Enlightenment[107].

These diverse channels provided larger and richer sources of knowledge about America which became the object of a growing interest for the Scottish intellectual elite and a recurrent topic in the writings of the Scottish Enlightenment[108]. Scottish botanists travelled to America in search of exotic species while medical emigrants supplied the intellectual community with surveys about the social and geographical characteristics of the colonies. America emerged as an attractive theme for the Scottish philosophers who found its untamed ecosystems and primitive societies particularly suitable for their scientific and anthropological enquiries. However, their interest was spurred by more practical reasons. Driven by their commitment to economic improvement, the Scots deemed that a better knowledge of America would render Scotland's colonial ventures more profitable.

Moreover, the intellectual elite was personally involved in American issues. Like their fellow professional and middle class counterparts who crossed the Atlantic, they were attentive to perspectives of career advancement in overseas territories and likely to have acquaintances or relatives involved in colonial life and imperial administration. Accordingly, at least 21% of the members of the Philosophical Society of Edinburgh had some personal tie with America while in the case of Glasgow Literary

---

[107] See Landsman, 'The Provinces and the Empire', p. 272.

[108] On America and the Scottish literati see Emerson, 'The Scottish Literati and America'.

Society the proportion amounted to 24%[109]. Similarly, among the Select Society, there were overseas traders and at least five of their members wrote something on America (including William Robertson and Adam Ferguson). Furthermore, Adam Ferguson visited America in 1777 while Hume had intended to go there in the 1740s[110]. Scottish clubs and associations published essays and held discussions about American issues, and promoted and circulated works on America. At the same time, Scottish periodicals and magazines devoted an increasing attention to American affairs; they listed civil and military posts, reported colonial struggles against the Indians and commented on market prospects and ship traffic. Quite significantly, after the loss of the colony, the Scottish interest in America faded and the intellectuals turned to the remains of the British empire where the Scots could still find career prospects and commercial opportunities.

The ideas of the Scottish Enlightenment permeated American cultural life. The moral philosophy of Hutcheson was taught in American colleges. Prominent figures of American intellectual life were indebted to Scottish authors. The ideas of David Hume can be perceived in the writings of Benjamin Franklin who was also a member of the Philosophical Society of Edinburgh and acquainted with Adam Smith and Lord Kames, with whom he kept correspondence. In addition, closer contacts had forged a common sense of provincial identity in both territories. As in Scotland, in spite of a sense of inferiority in relation to the metropolis and

[109] See Emerson, 'The Scottish Literati and America', p. 194.

[110] See Emerson, 'The Scottish Literati and America', p. 205.

efforts to imitate English standards, the Americans believed to be entitled to the same rights as their English counterparts and insisted on identifying themselves as British. In the same way, the Americans had developed a positive image of their provincial status within the empire. It was believed that the provinces were to take the lead of the imperial and national project due to their dynamism and their religious and moral soundness as opposed to metropolitan corruption and stagnation[111].

Scotland and the American War

During the American War Scotland became widely renowned for its resolute support of the pro-war faction and its enthusiasm for the government's line to an extent that opponents of the conflict called it 'a Scots war'[112]. Scotland's desire to overcome Jacobite identifications and be regarded as a reliable member of the Union arose remarkable loyalist attitudes, reflected on the striking amount of royal addresses sent in support of the government and the lack of petitions for reconciliation. However, during the 1760s and the 1770s the Scots had to face the rise of anti-Scottish feelings, which singled them out as alien and corrupting elements within the polity. The anti-Caledonian rage was especially poignant among anti-war campaigners who accused the Scots of promoting division with the colonists through the obscure manoeuvrings of Lord Bute. Since the Scots played a prominent role in the

111 Landsman, 'The Provinces and the Empire'.

112 See Conway, *The British Isles and the War*, p. 132.

regiments sent to North America to fight the rebellion, they were also blamed for profiting from the dismantling of the empire[113].

However, Scottish responses to the war were not monolithic. Until the outbreak of the armed hostilities, Glasgow merchants campaigned for conciliatory measures and criticised parliamentary harshness towards the colonists. Newspapers and magazines published letters and reviews which were critical of the war, reflecting the growing division among the public opinion as the conflict dragged and the defeats followed. Even among the blatantly loyalist Scottish representatives in Westminster, some supported the colonists' cause[114].

Within the Scottish Church, the division between the Evangelical and the Moderate factions was reflected on their positions regarding the American conflict. While the Moderates favoured Westminster policy, the Evangelicals showed a remarkable support for the colonists. Both parties expressed their positions mainly through sermons, in which the war was portrayed as a national tribulation, the consequence of the general laxity of faith and morals. However, while the ministers of the Moderate party linked the rebellion with the spread of republican principles and religious enthusiasm, the Evangelicals used the pulpit to commend the colonists' cause which, in their view, was justified on religious and political grounds. It was a fight against the government's attempts to erode civil liberties and religious

---

113 Conway, *The British Isles and the War*, p. 179. See also Bowen, *Elites, Enterprise*, p. 170.

114 See Dalphy I. Fagerstrom, 'Scottish Opinion and the American Revolution', *William and Mary Quarterly*, 11, (1954), pp. 252-275.

freedom, through arbitrary use of power and the recognition of full rights to the Canadian Catholics. The most salient among the Evangelicals was the Reverend John Erskine, who wrote the pamphlet *Shall I go to war with my American Brethren?* in which he depicted the colonies as a community blessed by God and mixed humanitarian arguments against the war with constitutional objections and a celebration of liberty[115].

The intellectuals were similarly divided. Hume scorned the government's colonial policy, endorsed the cause for independence and affirmed 'I am American in my principles'[116]. Adam Smith's friendship with Franklin and his rejection of imperial expansion as the best means for economic prosperity were followed by a sympathetic attitude towards the rebellion. He argued for the emancipation of the colonies, leaving trading connections unscathed through a commercial treaty but, since a peaceful separation was not realistic, he also proposed an imperial rearrangement based on free trade and a federal constitution[117]. Similarly, Lord Kames, in his correspondence with Franklin, expressed his sympathy for the colonists (although he denied the validity of their case in its constitutional aspects) and supported a federal solution as the alternative to the armed conflict. By contrast, in spite of early sympathies for the Americans, Adam Ferguson and William Robertson firmly supported the

---

115 Fagerstrom, 'Scottish Opinion', pp. 264-269 and Landsman, 'The Provinces and the Empire'.

116 Quoted in Fagerstrom, 'Scottish Opinion', p. 259.

117 On Smith's views on America, see Landsman, 'The Provinces and the Empire', pp. 264-266.

government's side. Besides, the discursive core of the Scottish Enlightenment encouraged a positive vision of war in which, according to the principles of civic humanism, peace and commerce were the source of luxury and effeminacy while civic virtues were fostered by militia service and martial spirit[118].

CONCLUSION

The development of a North British sense of identity in Scotland and the connections between Scotland and America underline the extent to which the notion of Britishness was created from the margins of the nation. As a response to the challenges posed by the dominant English core and in order to attain the benefits of imperial and commercial expansion, the British provinces asserted their claims to the same rights as their English counterparts. Whether in America or within the island, the provinces saw themselves as valuable members of the polity. This provincial perspective has been considered by Landsman the result of transatlantic connections, defined by Kidd as 'emulative patriotisms' and analysed in its extra parliamentary vitality by Wilson. Composed by strands of opinion often contradictory, identities in the margins both rejected and rendered to the lure of the metropolis, affirming their moral superiority while imitating the patterns set by the centre. They defined themselves as British over narrow and parochial self-definitions which were often used from England to protect its ascendancy. Even if an awareness of

[118] See Conway, *The British Isles and the War*, p. 328 and Fagerstrom, 'Scottish Opinion'.

their inferiority and subordination to the southern part of the state lingered throughout the century, the British margins elaborated a positive image of their provincial identity linked to negative visions of the metropolis. By blending discourses of a varied nature, such as civic humanism and Protestantism, a sense of self-worth emerged on the margins of Britain by which provincial life was defined by its dynamism, freedom and morality. Consequently, the provinces had the right to take full part in national dynamics in support of a common good threatened by metropolitan corruption and vice. Scotland's response towards the union can thus be understood as part of the provincial revival witnessed in eighteenth century Britain.

Authors such as Bowen have emphasised the links between the empire and the British provinces, thus highlighting the common cultural traits shared across the British world. Through commercial enterprises and overseas trade, social and cultural connections were developed between the core and the periphery of the empire. The provinces, as proved by the case of Scotland, often equalled London's influence over the colonies, helping to create this common perspective, irrespective of geographical distinctions. Moreover, during the eighteenth century, London's influence over the colonies was steadily eroded by other centres of commercial and entrepreneurial dynamism which brought their own methods, ideas and cultural traditions to commercial and imperial ventures[119].

---

[119] Bowen, *Elites, Enterprise.*

While British provincials defined themselves against England, within England provincial culture reacted against London's centrality. Like in the outer boundaries, people from the English counties 'constructed a view of the province as having all the virtue, culture and civic mindedness but none of the vice of the capital. Provincial urban life was represented in local papers as civilised, intimate and respectable – a marked contrast to the disorder and corruption that reigned in London'[120]. English extra parliamentary politics were fuelled by the provinces, as Kathleen Wilson has argued, and, in spite of a fervent anglocentrism and hostility towards non-English members of the body politic, they benefited from the contact with the wider British province. Extra parliamentary discourses popularised by the press were diffused through the margins of the British empire where they were assumed by British provincials as their own. Thus, a clear parallelism can be noticed between the arguments used by English oppositionist politics and the 'emulative patriotisms' of the margins because both were 'concerned with the extension of the achievements of British exceptionalism', the former across the disenfranchised emergent classes, the latter, within the British world[121].

Accordingly, the farther margins transformed politics within the metropolis. The American rebellion fostered claims for constitutional reform, while the national crisis thus provoked allowed radical politics a scope and resonance which, however

---

[120] Wilson, *The Sense of the People*, p. 40.

[121] Kidd, 'North Britishness', p. 362.

brief, had no precedent in the century. At the same time, the margins of empire used the notions forged by English extra parliamentary politics in their own benefit, transforming their meaning to encompass their own vindications. Thus, the Scots frequently used the language of extra parliamentary politics in order to assert their claims to full anglicisation and equality. Similarly, like in England, Scottish anti-war movements were closely linked to demands for political reform and radicalism in which Scottish particularities were incorporated to the classical demands of English oppositional campaigns[122].

Political mobilisation at a local level, clubs, associations and the expansion of the press helped Scotland to join the political atmosphere of the time and enabled its body politic to adopt the language of English constitutionalism and its claims. In this sense, Scotland followed trends that had been identified in the English provinces. However, Scotland's particularities should be recalled once again for the Scottish Enlightenment played a key role not only by spreading the tenets of English political culture among their contemporaries but also by refashioning English political discourses and making them more suitable to sustain a British notion of identity, a task whose resonance was felt not only in Scotland but throughout the British world. Through a rigid criticism of the most extravagant claims of English patriotism, the leading figures of the Scottish Enlightenment contributed to the creation of an identity which, although still deeply anglocentric,

[122] See Fagerstrom, 'Scottish Opinion'.

was able to incorporate provincial identities into the core of British nationhood.

The Scottish literati's commitment to the tenets of North Britishness did not involve a blind acceptance of the features of English political culture. They were interested in skimming off the aspects which were contrary to the acceptance of Scotland within the Union and contradicted the enlightened allegiance to cosmopolitism and modernity. The Scots, besides, had clearly in mind their own frustrations in their attempts to advance their careers in the south. The authors of the Scottish Enlightenment rejected England's current factionalism and radicalism in politics, due to their anti-Caledonian expressions and to the conservative bias of the Scottish Enlightenment. Accordingly, authors such as Hume embarked on a critique of Wilkite politics and the political radicalism of the 1760s and 1770s, arguing that the growth of populism was contrary to the development of the arts and culture, endangered the traditional sources of social authority, which assured stability, and represented a triumph of passion and demagogy over reason. As Pocock has remarked in the case of Hume, he was a North Briton 'committed to the restatement of English culture in such terms that it would become British and that Scotsmen would make their way in it'[123].

As we have seen, the Scottish model of social evolution involved a praise of the English experience, which was deemed the leading example of contemporary advancement. Nevertheless, the authors of the Scottish Enlightenment refused to yield to the

[123] Pocock, 'Hume and the American Revolution', p. 128.

celebration of English exceptionality and God-willed success which often abounded in current Whig historiography. By analysing the objective causes of progress in moral, economic and social terms, the Scottish literati exposed a pattern of advancement that was available to all societies and was not the privilege of a particular nation. At the same time, as it has been pointed out, they adopted a detached attitude regarding patriotic feelings, which were described as belonging to the contingence of human vicissitudes rather than to the immanent essence of the national soil[124].

In tune with their characteristic rejection of unfounded dogmas and cosmopolitan nature, English historical experience was framed by the Scottish literati within the wider background of European evolution and deprived of the ethnic determinism that sometimes was present in the most enthusiastic English commentators. Even if its present state was considered exceptional, the Scots did not hesitate to describe England's past as a barbaric and backward when compared with the achievements of the Antiquity and Middle East civilisations. In Kidd's words, they 'were convinced of the scale of the English historical achievement, but they did not succumb to the extravagant puff which English commentators expended on its behalf'[125].

Therefore, the eighteenth century Scottish experience seems to be fully integrated in the British backcloth. Scotland was part of a provincial dynamic of interaction with an Anglo-defined core, in

[124] Kidd, 'North Britishness'.

[125] Kidd, 'North Britishness'.

which the vitality of the margins was spurred by trends originated in the centre and by the desire of participating on an equal ground, a yearning which was either expressed through outbursts of local pride or through calls for further anglicisation. But the anglicisation of the margins ran parallel to the permeation of the core of Englishness by the provinces, a phenomenon exemplified by the Scots, who successfully placed their intellects, manpower and talents at the heart of England.

The American conflict, in this light, could be seen as the result of a new turn in the development of a British national identity. The claims of the colonies for full integration within the body politic resulted on the break of their bonds with the British state which refused their demands for parity. By contrast, within the framework of the British island and regarding Scotland, the aftermath of the war resulted in the strengthening of a more inclusive and less problematic notion of Britishness. The end of the war was marked by a decline of anti-Scottish feelings and the proliferation of positive images of Scotland which gradually weakened old identifications with Jacobitism, despotism and rusticity (which however did not disappear). The important role played by the Scots within the army during the war was broadly recognised and, as a result, Scotland's loyalty and utility within the nation was no longer questioned. Even the figure of the Highlander lost partly its negative connotations. Highlander regiments were often portrayed as the paradigm of military courage and dutiful service while the harsh government measures regarding Highland costume and traditions were relaxed.

In Scotland, the ideology of emulation and improvement had rendered its benefits. The entrenched hostilities towards Scottish integration and full participation within the Union seemed to be finally overcome. However, alongside an English oriented British identity, a sense of distinctive Scottishness endured. It has been argued that the outbreaks of Scottish pride were the product of the perception that the union was not fulfilled and demanded integration rather than autonomy. Such was the case of the debate over the militia issue. Although the Scots often resorted to a sense of local pride in their calls for a Scottish militia, they were actually demanding the extension of the English rights to their territory. In addition, the failure of the attempts to create a Scottish force was offensive to many Scots because it was perceived as a proof of English distrust. Even so, a deep attachment to Scotland persisted that cannot be reduced to a mere by-product linked to the contingencies of Scotland's fortunes within the Union. It was rather an intrinsic component of Scotland's identity which, in its emotional attachment to a lost and remote glorified past, would become strengthened after the change of the century, as Enlightenment practicalities and faith in progress faded away, overcome by the Romantic longings for mystified pasts, lost worlds and ancient mythologies.

3

Prescription and Progress[1]

William Alexander was probably born in Halifax in 1742. During the 1760s, he received university education in Edinburgh's Medical School, where he presumably attended William Cullen's medical classes[2]. After a number of years in the army and practising medicine in Edinburgh, he took his MD in 1769. Although he apparently spent most of his professional life in London, he retained strong links with Scotland. He kept

[1] This chapter is based on a Master's thesis presented at the University of York, as part of a Master in Women's and Gender History.

[2] For Scottish medical teaching in the eighteenth century and its links with the Scottish Enlightenment ideas on society, see Christopher Lawrence, 'The Nervous System and Society in the Scottish Enlightenment', in Barry Barnes and Steven Shapin (eds.), *Natural Order. Historical Studies of Scientific Culture* (Beverly Hills & London, 1979), pp. 19-40.

correspondence with Scottish cultural figures, such as Alexander Monro senior, who might have been his patron, and was admitted to the Medical Society of Edinburgh (1765) and the Royal Society of Edinburgh (1783). We also know that several of his medical investigations were based on Edinburgh's locations and were read and discussed in Edinburgh's cultural associations. Even less is known of his last years and his death, which is thought to have occurred in 1788[3].

However, Alexander's links with his Scottish context go beyond his biographical details. His *History of Women* should be considered as part of the conjectural histories that flourished in Scotland at that time, and it was strongly informed by the Scottish Enlightenment discussions of public and private virtue and women's role in society. Like the conjectural historians, Alexander linked women with general progress and with the protection of virtue in the face of the potential moral dangers that resulted from modernisation. The book provides an account of the general process of civilisation and a discussion of the moral virtues associated with progress and the means to preserve them. As Mónica Bolufer Peruga and Isabel Morant Deusa have emphasised, the Enlightenment itself and eighteenth century debates about women can be better examined by placing them in their local contexts in order to fully understand the interplaying of

[3] Jane Rendall, 'Introduction' to William Alexander, (1779 ed.) *The History of Women. From the Earliest Antiquity to the Present Time* (Bristol, 1995), 2 vols. and Jane Rendall, 'Alexander, Dr. William (1742-1788?)', in H. C. G. Matthew (ed.), *The New Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004).

gender notions with other historical variables and account for their peculiarities[4].

This chapter analyses Alexander's work in the context of the Scottish Enlightenment. First we will examine the social and cultural conditions of the Scottish Enlightenment, which shaped Alexander's historical and intellectual context. Secondly, we will review the discourses that informed the Scottish notions of private and public morality and the role ascribed to women in them. Finally, we will proceed to examine the book to analyse the way in which these influences were articulated, illustrating the tension between progressivism and conservatism that characterised the Scottish Enlightenment, and exploring the paradoxes that resulted from this tension and its reconciliation in Alexander's work.

THE INTELLECTUAL BACKGROUND OF WILLIAM ALEXANDER: THE SCOTTISH ENLIGHTENMENT

William Alexander's *History of Women* should be placed against the cultural and intellectual background of the Scottish Enlightenment. It flourished during the eighteenth century in the Lowlands of Scotland and reached its peak from the 1740s to the 1780s. During this period, Scotland became one of the centres of the European Enlightenment and witnessed a boom of writings in subjects such as political economy, jurisprudence, natural science, moral philosophy or history.

---

[4] See Mónica Bolufer Peruga and Isabel Morant Deusa, 'On Women's Reason, Education and Love', *Gender and History*, (1998), pp. 183-216.

However, the Scottish Enlightenment cannot be examined as a purely academic pursuit because at the same time as its most significant authors wrote and published their major works, Scotland witnessed a period of cultural dynamism and renewal in different fields, such as the arts, literature, science and architecture[5]. The Scottish Enlightenment had also a social and institutional dimension. The main cultural institutions of Scotland, the Church and the universities, were reformed according to the guiding principles of the times. Clubs and associations thrived in Edinburgh, together with more informal meetings in taverns, all devoted to the open discussion of the enlightened ideas and the most pressing problems of Scottish society[6]. These places became spaces for polite social intercourse among the members of the intellectual elite and the members of the middling and upper ranks of society. The Scottish Enlightenment, then, cannot be fully understood without taking into account the formation of a public sphere of opinion, exemplified by these meetings, and its links

---

[5] Richard L. Sher, *Church and University in the Scottish Enlightenment* (Edinburgh, 1985), p. 9. For the eighteenth century discussion of the reformation of Edinburgh, see Anand C. Chitnis, *The Scottish Enlightenment: A Social History* (Totowa, New Jersey, 1976).

[6] For instance, from 1723 to 1745, the Honourable Society for the Improvement in the Knowledge of Agriculture devoted its efforts to encourage agricultural development in Scotland and, more broadly, to promote a general economic improvement. It was followed by the Select Society, founded in 1754, in which issues of economic modernisation and political reform were discussed. See N. T. Phillipson, 'Towards a Definition of the Scottish Enlightenment', in David Williams Paul Fritz (ed.), *City and Society in the Eighteenth Century* (Toronto, 1973), pp. 125-147.

with the 'low' forms of enlightened literature, namely periodicals, magazines and newspapers[7].

This 'cultural vitality' explains the distinctive Scottish identity of the Scottish Enlightenment. The Scottish Enlightenment shared with the European Enlightenment essential values and principles, such as rationalism and the concern about issues of improvement and progress. However, beyond these underlying common features, the nature of the Scottish Enlightenment was influenced by the geographical context in which it evolved. In spite of the Treaty of the Union, after 1707 Scotland kept a strong sense of identity. It had its own traditions, manners and language and retained an important number of institutions. Besides, the authors of the Scottish Enlightenment were primarily concerned with Scottish reality and they directed their enquiries to understanding and answering the most pressing issues of their time, *i.e.* the growing modernisation and commercialisation of Scottish society. Some of the most significant writers, the moderate literati, rooted their ideology in the religious tradition of Scottish Presbyterianism and this group, like the majority of the authors of the Scottish

[7] Sher, *Church and University*, p. 12. For an account of the formation of a public sphere of opinion and the links between high and low Enlightenment in pre-revolutionary France, see Roger Chartier, *The Cultural Origins of the French Revolution* (Durham & London, 1991). On Habermas and the public sphere of opinion, see John Brewer, 'This, That and the Other: Public, Social and Private in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries', in Dario Castiglione and Lesley Sharpe (eds.), *Shifting the Boundaries: Transformations of the Languages of Public and Private in the Eighteenth Century* (Exeter, 1995), pp. 1-21, and Jane Rendall, 'Women and the Public Sphere', *Gender and History*, 11, (1999), pp. 475-488.

Enlightenment, lived in Scotland and developed their careers in Scottish institutions[8].

Several factors help to understand why Scotland, a backward region of the British Isles, undertook a leading role in the intellectual developments of the eighteenth century. Authors such as Chitnis[9] have emphasised the importance of social and economic factors: agricultural improvement, the reform of the university and the high rates of literacy of Scottish society. However, as Phillipson has remarked[10], the Scottish Enlightenment can be better explained by focusing on the origins and functions of the Scottish cultural elite and the central role played by Edinburgh. As we have seen, despite the Treaty of Union, Scotland kept much of its autonomy and, thus, Edinburgh remained an administrative and political centre which attracted the provincial governing elite. The Union was advantageous for the ruling classes because it guaranteed free trade with England and her colonies. The management of Scottish affairs was kept in the hands of the Scottish elite because of the long distance between London and Scotland and the lack of knowledge of English

[8] Among the writers of the Scottish Enlightenment, Richard Sher has singled out the group of the moderate literati (Hugh Blair, Alexander Carlyle, Adam Ferguson, John Home, William Robertson and John Jardine) due to the similarities among their writings and ideas and because of their central role in the spread of the principles of the Scottish Enlightenment and in the management of Scottish society. See Sher, *Church and University*.

[9] Chitnis, *Scottish Enlightenment*.

[10] Phillipson, 'Towards a Definition of the Scottish Enlightenment'.

politicians about Scottish affairs[11]. In addition, the modest economic resources of the Scottish aristocracy meant that only few of them could move to London and effectively engage in British politics. Therefore, for most of the Scottish elite, Edinburgh was the place to display their political influence.

Nevertheless, the attachment of the ruling elite to Scotland was not the mere product of the impossibility of moving to London but it was also a primary element of their ethos. The Scottish elite was imbued with a strong sense of local pride. They saw themselves as the leaders of the community whose main commitment was its improvement, through economic and cultural development; to 'draw it [Scotland] from a state of rudeness to one of cosmopolitan refinement'[12]. The links of the political elite with Edinburgh and their commitment to cultural and economic improvement encouraged its role as the centre of Scottish cultural life. The city became a point of attraction for ministers, lawyers, professors and members of the gentry who were enticed by the vitality of the city clubs, associations and University but who also contributed to this intellectual vitality. By the 1750s, the cultural dynamism of the city had made of Edinburgh 'the Athens of the North'[13].

Edinburgh's cultural ferment joined together the ruling elite of Scotland and her cultural elite who were to become the main

---

[11] However, the British government used prominent Scottish aristocrats (such as Argyll or Bute) to effectively control Scottish affairs rather than to allow Scotland a degree of self-management.

[12] Phillipson, 'Towards a Definition of the Scottish Enlightenment', p. 127.

[13] Phillipson, 'Towards a Definition of the Scottish Enlightenment', p. 126.

authors of the Scottish Enlightenment. However, the bonds between the aristocratic elite and the emerging cultural elite of Scotland were mostly grounded in their common ethos. The authors of the Scottish Enlightenment shared with the ruling elite their concern with the improvement of Scotland. They viewed themselves as agents of progress and as the enlightened leaders of their society. The Scottish literati, then, provided the ruling elite with the 'means of articulating their identity as a governing elite; they had become the guardians of the *virtú* of an aristocratic society'[14]. As a result, the literati increased their influence and authority over society, which by the 1760s was exemplified by the takeover by the moderate literati of the University and the Church of Scotland[15]. In addition, after the 1750s the aristocratic elite, who had benefited by the steady growth of the Scottish economy, yielded more to the lure of London. As a result, Edinburgh's cultural and social life was increasingly controlled by the middle and professional classes of Scottish society[16], from whose ranks the authors of the Scottish Enlightenment came.

The Scottish writers shared common beliefs which allow us to consider them as a part of the same intellectual current. They shared a wide set of common principles which were also the main

---

[14] Phillipson, 'Towards a Definition of the Scottish Enlightenment', p. 140.

[15] Some of the main authors of the Scottish Enlightenment, the moderate literati, achieved an increasing authority in Scottish society. They were actively involved in the political and ecclesiastical disputes of the period in which they displayed their influence, often with the support of prominent members of the political elite. They achieved important offices in the Church of Scotland and in the universities, especially in the University of Edinburgh through the work of their leader Robertson. See Sher, *Church and University*.

[16] Phillipson, 'Towards a Definition of the Scottish Enlightenment'.

features of the European Enlightenment: love of learning, faith in reason and science, humanitarianism, religious and intellectual tolerance, cosmopolitanism, aversion of fanaticism, torture and slavery and an engagement with progress and happiness as main aims. However, these writers can be singled out as a distinctive branch of the Enlightenment because of their particular concern with 'problems of man and society' and their commitment to the problems of Scotland[17]. They wanted Scotland to be an economically developed region but also a polite, learned and virtuous community, according to the main currents of European thinking. They believed that the progress of Scotland could be achieved 'by the selection and emulation of suitably progressive models, and by mutual self-education'[18]. Their ultimate ambition was to reconcile modernisation with the preservation of a Scottish sense of community and to avoid the potential dangers derived from this improvement.

The Scottish Enlightenment's progressive nature was therefore constantly restrained and the encouragement of changes was usually coupled with an attachment to tradition. In spite of more traditional visions that portray the Scottish authors conforming to the conventional stereotype of the enlightened as tireless fighters against tradition, some authors[19] have underlined the conservative core of the Scottish Enlightenment. In spite of

---

[17] Sher, *Church and University*, p. 6.

[18] Phillipson, 'Towards a Definition of the Scottish Enlightenment', p. 135.

[19] See Chitnis, *Scottish Enlightenment*. By contrast, see Sher, *Church and University*; John Dwyer, *Virtuous Discourse: Sensibility and Community in Eighteenth Century Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1987); John Dwyer, *The Age of the Passions. An Interpretation of Adam Smith and the Scottish Enlightenment* (East Lothian, 1998).

their defence of values of tolerance and humanism and their disapproval of authoritarianism in intellectual disputes, the authors of the Scottish Enlightenment took the side of the established order when dealing with social and political arrangements[20]. Regarding politics, they were committed to the defence of the union, irrespective of their deep Scottish roots and their ambivalent attitude towards London and the nascent English empire. With respect to social organisation, they were eager advocates of the established distinctions of rank. However, there were political differences among them. Unlike Robertson and Ferguson, Millar supported the American Revolution and was more sympathetic towards the French Revolution.

The conservatism of the Scottish Enlightenment was also reflected in its emphasis on discipline, which was encouraged at different levels and in somehow subtle ways. Discipline and control were key elements in achieving public and private virtue and in the education of youngsters and women to which a good number of books were devoted[21].

However, this conservative tone cannot be understood as a non-critical acceptance of tradition. In their reflection on Scottish

---

[20] A good example of this combination of the typical enlightened principles with a keen respect for the *status quo* was the stance of the moderate literati's regarding religion. These authors disapproved of religious fanaticism and doctrinarism and were fervent advocates of religious tolerance and free enquiry. They firmly defended Hume and Kames when they were accused of impiety and immorality in the 1750s. However, during the Church disputes of the 1740s and 1750s, they condemned free action and supported the law of patronage that allowed the traditional elite to appoint ministers. See Sher, *Church and University*.

[21] The links between the conservative nature of the Scottish Enlightenment and its emphasis on discipline was perceived by John Dwyer. See Dwyer, *Virtuous Discourse* and Dwyer, *The Age of the Passions*.

reality, the Scottish authors disapproved of many of its existing features, such as economic backwardness, the rusticity of the Highlands or the past tendency to religious and political conflict. They did not long for any past 'golden age' and their studies on the evolution of society were aimed at proving the superiority of the current state of civilisation as compared to primitive societies[22]. They were firm advocates of the modernisation of Scotland, both culturally and economically. Nevertheless, faced with the way in which these changes should be carried out, they believed that progress should be gradual and based upon the best features of the existing reality; they were reluctant to sacrifice the marks of Scottish identity in order to the implement an abstract notion of progress or to blindly follow European progressive models. Most authors supported transformation coupled with stability, improvement combined with the careful maintenance of order and discipline, and economic growth tied to steady virtue. It might have been the memory of the instability and division of the recent

[22] However, in this period this longing for an early period of innocence existed. Some authors, when confronted with the problems of modernisation of Scotland, looked at the past in their search for a model of society. For Gilbert Stuart, ancient Germanic societies practised the private and civic virtues that were lost in his current society. Others, such as James Macpherson, spread a romantic vision of ancient Scotland through the publication of the Poems of *Ossian*. The praise of ancient Scottish and Germanic manners was, besides, a common theme among the writers of the Scottish Enlightenment who regarded this Anglo-Saxon and Scottish past distinctiveness as the basis of current improvement. See, Jane Rendall, 'Tacitus Engendered: "Gothic Feminism" and British Histories, c. 1750-1800', in Geoffrey Cubitt (ed.), *Imagining Nations* (Manchester & New York, 1998), pp. 57-74 and Jane Rendall, 'Clio, Mars and Minerva: the Scottish Enlightenment and the Writing of Women's History', in T. M. Devine and J. R. Young (eds.), *Eighteenth Century Scotland. New Perspectives.* (East Linton, 1999), pp. 134-151.

Scottish history which drove them to emphasise continuity and control together with the necessity for change.

Besides this ideological core, personal bonds and strong friendships united the authors of the Scottish Enlightenment. They maintained a fluent correspondence, promoted clubs and associations, and joined together to endorse and discuss questions such as the militia issue. However, there were also ideological disagreements among them to the extent that the Scottish Enlightenment cannot be considered a completely homogeneous current. One of the main sources of ideological tension was the balance between determinism and human agency. Adam Ferguson maintained that 'man was a free agent and a creative being, capable of shaping his own environment according to his needs, in spite of the powerful determinist forces which threatened to overwhelm him'[23]. In contrast, David Hume and Adam Smith believed that the world was regulated by mechanisms which could be understood by men but not controlled or modified by them.

Another source of tension was found in the dialectic between modernisation and the danger of moral corruption that arose from modern commercial societies. Some of the authors of the Scottish Enlightenment, such as Adam Smith or David Hume, were more concerned with the problem of achieving wealth than with maintaining public and private virtue. Adam Smith devoted *The Wealth of Nations* to support the convenience of commercial societies within this debate[24]. Smith remarked that modern

---

[23] Phillipson, 'Towards a Definition of the Scottish Enlightenment', p. 143.

[24] See Istvan Hont and Michael Ignatieff, 'Needs and Justice in The Wealth of Nations: An Introductory Essay', in Istvan Hont and Michael Ignatieff (eds.),

commercial societies encouraged inequality and the pursuit of one's interest but, at the same time, the same principles that ruled modern societies, namely the division of labour and material inequality, provided better conditions of living for all its members. As a result, Smith deemed these societies preferable to former social organisations, where public virtue was practiced through the rules of moral economy, and to primitive societies where the economic goods were equally distributed among the social body.

By contrast, Adam Ferguson and William Robertson remarked that material advantages will prove nothing without the sound practice of private and public virtue to counteract the dangers of moral corruption and social disintegration linked to economic improvement. These authors emphasised virtue over wealth because without virtue, no long-term material progress could be sustained. However, even Adam Smith was deeply concerned with the spread of luxury and criticised the huge profits that could be earned from commerce which engendered extravagance and waste.

The different emphases given to virtue and wealth led to differences of style among the writers of the Scottish Enlightenment. A didactic and pedagogical style prevailed in the writings of the moderate literati; their main aim was the inculcation of moral precepts, beyond mere intellectual pursuits. David Hume's style and writings, however, were part of a more abstract and analytical enterprise. He sought not to moralise but to delve

---

Wealth and Virtue. The Shaping of Political Economy in the Scottish Enlightenment (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 1-44.

into metaphysical and epistemological matters with impartiality. His writings lacked the prescriptive nature that characterised many of the works of his contemporaries, whose intellectual enquiry was only part of their main concern: to encourage the practice of virtue in all the spheres of life.

In the 1760s, when William Alexander attended the University of Edinburgh, the Scottish Enlightenment was already well grounded. Many of its characteristic clubs and associations were in place while its key figures were appointed to Scottish universities and their major works published. Edinburgh's medical school reflected the main concerns of the Scottish Enlightenment. In addition, in the 1770s, when the *History of Women* appeared, the main Scottish works on history were written. Alexander's social position, university education and membership of Edinburgh cultural associations are also suggestive he was a man of the Scottish Enlightenment. He shared concerns of morality and modernisation and, as we will explore, the balance between progress and conservatism. However, the relevance of the Scottish Enlightenment should be considered in relation to issues of morality, progress and femininity which strongly influenced Alexander's work.

THE IDEOLOGY OF FEMININITY IN THE SCOTTISH ENLIGHTENMENT: MORALITY, SENSIBILITY, DOMESTICITY AND CIVILISATION

The ideology of femininity in the Scottish Enlightenment was connected with issues of morality and civilisation. To understand the role ascribed to women by William Alexander, we should turn first to Scottish reflections on public and private morals and then, linked to the former, notions of sensibility, sociability and civilisation current among the Scottish literati.

Private and Public Virtue: Christian-Stoicism and Civic Humanism

Private Virtue: Christian-Stoic Morality

The authors of the Scottish Enlightenment used the discourse of Stoicism related to private virtue[25]. They were well acquainted with Seneca, Cicero and Epictetus as well as expressing their admiration for the Greek and Roman stoics and their 'manly and active philosophy'[26]. The classic stoic tradition had reached the eighteenth century through the Dutch Humanists of the sixteenth century[27], who adapted the classical corpus of Stoicism to the demands of the early modern period. In the sixteenth century, when the nascent modern states were increasing their power and

[25] For a discussion of Stoicism in the Scottish Enlightenment, see Sher, *Church and University* and Dwyer, *Virtuous Discourse*.

[26] William Robertson. Quoted in Sher, *Church and University*, p. 181.

[27] See Dorinda Outram, *The Body and the French Revolution. Sex, Class and Political Culture* (New Haven & London, 1989) and Dwyer, *Virtuous Discourse*.

control of the population through the monopoly of violence and the enforcement of discipline, authors such as Lipsius and Grotius rescued the classical values of Stoicism to provide the public man with the skills needed to prosper in the newly ordered politics of a society in turmoil. Accordingly, the Dutch humanists endorsed stoic values such as moderation and prudence while rejecting the disengagement from the world advised by the stoic philosophers of classic Antiquity.

But the Scottish writers did not merely follow the paradigm re-formulated by the Dutch Humanists; they reshaped the discourse of Stoicism by adding to it elements of Christian belief and rationalism. It was the power of reason which allowed men to achieve stoic self-composure and control of the passions. With regard to Christianity, Scottish authors gave God a central role in their understanding of Stoicism. They believed in the existence of a divine plan that ruled human fate and history according to the will of God, giving a moral meaning to a changing world that would otherwise appear as chaotic and meaningless. The presence of God allowed the Scottish philosophers to regard the final outcome of human efforts with optimism: God's desires, though sometimes unintelligible, were benevolent and just and eventually directed to improvement. In order to demonstrate the righteousness of God's will, the authors of the Scottish Enlightenment emphasised the role of Christianity in history as a positive, civilising force, which had reduced the inequality between the sexes, abolished slavery and restrained war[28]. In sum, for the

[28] Sher, *Church and University*, p. 182.

Scottish writers, the values of Stoicism they advocated and the values that sprang from Christian belief were the same.

For the Scottish authors, self-command, prudence and moderation were key features in the achievement of virtue and even the 'essential prerequisite of happiness and virtue'[29]. Through the use of reason, men should achieve independence from the inner passions and from the external circumstances of life. Wealth, social prestige, material success, the same as the passions, were mere delusions that enslaved the will. Far from being signs of virtue or the foundation of happiness, worldly achievements often endangered well-being by rendering men the victims of vicissitudes that they could not control. Private virtue, then, was defined mainly as an inner quality, which would allow men to remain unscathed from the corrupting influence of commercial society. By placing inner tranquillity as the main source of true virtue and happiness, the Scottish authors wanted to keep men away from the lure of the false refinements of an increasingly affluent society and to prefer a sound stoic stance to the temptations of luxury.

Besides the concern with moral corruption, the Scottish elaboration of the discourse of Stoicism is characterised by a conservative stance. In order to achieve desirable inner peace, men should submit themselves to the current course of events, to their *fortuna*. This notion referred to the alterations in human life that are not under men's control but under God's will. Nevertheless, since it was also understood as one's social position, *fortuna* was a notion full of social implications. When the Scottish authors

[29] Dwyer, *Virtuous Discourse*, p. 48.

remarked that social position was irrelevant for attaining happiness and enforced resignation as an essential attitude in the pursuit of virtue and happiness, they were actually supporting the existing hierarchy. Moreover, since social order was part of God's designs, they equated its subversion to rebellion against God's will.

In spite of the emphasis placed on the individual, the Scottish authors did not want to produce isolated individuals, disengaged from the community. They regarded man as a social creature and, accordingly, recommended a compromise between the harmful engagement with worldly amusements and affairs and a likewise prejudicial withdrawal from the world. In other words, they recommended coupling a stoic stance with a commitment to the common good. Moreover, the true virtuous man should join self-discipline with the practice of benevolence towards others as prescribed by Christian doctrine. In fact, the practice of private virtue by upright individuals was not enough to preserve the bonds of the moral community. Private virtue should contribute to the common good and public virtue should be equally upheld. The links between public and private virtue, between individual morality and the common good were, therefore, pressing concerns for the Scottish writers, who explored these questions using the discourse of civic humanism.

The Defence of Public Virtue: Civic Humanism and Patriarchal Conservatism

The Scottish authors delved into the civic humanist tradition in order to resolve their conflicting reactions regarding the growing modernisation of Scottish society, that is to say, the increasing

commercialisation of Scotland and its incorporation in the Union[30]. With respect to the Treaty of the Union, they became keen advocates of its positive effects for Scotland, while retaining a sense of distrust towards London and its political and courtly life and attempting to preserve a strong Scottish identity. In addition, several Scottish authors saw England as a nation in decadence where, as in the Roman empire, imperial expansion and economic growth were undermining private and public morals through the spread of luxury and corruption.

Of all the current transformations that Scotland was facing, Scottish authors were particularly troubled by economic growth and the replacement of traditional economic models based on agriculture by market economy. They reacted to this phenomenon in three ways that reflected the Scottish Enlightenment's basic tension between material improvement and morality, and the chief concern of establishing a balance between the benefits of economic modernisation and its drawbacks. Firstly, they actively encouraged economic development. Secondly, they applied themselves to describe, analyse and explain the former by giving birth to the academic field of political economy whose main representatives were David Hume and Adam Smith. Lastly, they focused on mitigating the potentially harmful effects of economic modernisation[31].

These responses cannot be completely separated since most of the writings of the Scottish Enlightenment encompassed all

---

30 For the influence of the civic humanist tradition in the Scottish Enlightenment, see Dwyer, *Virtuous Discourse* and Sher, *Church and University*.

31 Sher, *Church and University*, p. 187.

three. However, it can be said that the question of controlling the potential dangers of economic growth was a key issue as can be seen by the writings of even the most determined advocates of commercialisation, such as Adam Smith. Material improvement was essential to achieve the degree of wealth and leisure that allowed men to divert their minds from subsistence, engage in polite intercourse and devote themselves to the advancement of arts and sciences, bringing about civilisation and refinement. But the same material advancement that was the source of so many benefits also entailed certain pitfalls. Excessive wealth was the source of luxury and the love of wealth over all things which endangered not only the moral fibre of the community but also the political liberties and society itself, evidence of which was Imperial Rome and the Eastern nations. Economic growth could be the first step towards the disintegration of the political body, not only by spurring tyranny but also, on the other side of the political spectrum, by encouraging disaffection and anarchy.

Current Scottish society had not yet reached the levels of these nations but, as the Scottish authors remarked, it was not free of danger. The commercial economy was already on its way, threatening the traditional communal ties based on landed economy. They were especially suspicious of the effects of the division of labour and of the expansion of paper currency and the banking system which would allow commerce to surpass agricultural activities, breaking the ethical bonds of moral economy, and newly enriched individuals to take the place of the

traditional landed elite[32]. The union with England was seen as a spur to this trend rather than as a restraint. Furthermore, the moral values of the community and of the individuals were at stake. Modern commercial societies fostered luxury and extravagance, among other moral evils that were opposed to the Christian-Stoic precepts that the Scottish authors recommended.

On their reflections on the effects of affluence, the Scottish intellectuals employed a highly gendered language. One of the main effects of luxury on society was the effeminacy of its members. By falling to the lure of luxury and material amenities, men lost their masculinity, blurring gender differences and, consequently, the natural order of things. Effeminacy meant not only the loss of male sexual identity but was also the germ of dreadful evils for the social and political body. It meant lack of political liberties and falling under the yoke of tyranny exemplified by Eastern nations. By becoming women, men could not exert the public virtues that allowed them to be citizens, according to the language of civic republicanism. Overcame by greed and the pursuit of 'baubles and trinkets', men could no longer raise their efforts to the noblest commitments of citizenship. The links between luxury, political existence and masculinity are clear in Carlyle's words, 'it is surely better to be a little less rich and commercial than by ceasing to be men, to endanger our existence as a nation'[33]. With regard to morality, effeminacy meant dullness,

---

[32] For a study of the Scottish Enlightenment debate about the convenience of maintaining the features of moral economy and Adam Smith's opposed position in this debate see Hont and Ignatieff, 'Needs and Justice'.

[33] Quoted in Sher, *Church and University*, p. 239.

the lack of the moral fibre necessary to achieve the stern, controlled stoic stance, which was a moral pattern filled with masculine connotations. Self-command and control were masculine attributes in the discourse of Stoicism, opposed to the female tendency to passion.

In addition, the blurring of gender differences threatened the traditional social order, based on patriarchal relations. The ideology of patriarchy established the dependence of women on men (either father or husband), youngsters on adults and those who lacked land on landowners. This patriarchal structure emerged in the early modern period and evolved through time. During the *Ancien Régime*, it was sanctioned as a means to ensure social control through a chain of authority in which the rule of the male head of the household was considered to mirror the fatherly rule of God and the king[34]. In their use of the term effeminacy in relation to social, political and moral issues and in spite of their vindication of the discourse of civic humanism, the Scottish authors were drawing on elements from other traditions such as Orientalism or the underlying discourse of patriarchy. Furthermore, eighteenth century discourses of Stoicism and civic humanism were not gender neutral, as authors such as Hunt and Outram have argued in their works on the French Revolution[35].

---

34 For an study of patriarchy in the Modern period and its transformations in the transition to the Contemporary period, see Paula Miller, *Transformations of Patriarchy in the West, 1500-1900* (Indiana & Bloomington, 1998).

35 See Lynn Hunt, *The Family Romance of the French Revolution* (London, 1992), Lynn Hunt, *Politics, Culture and Class in the French Revolution* (Berkeley & Los Angeles, 1984) and Outram, *The Body and the French Revolution.*

Therefore, in the Scottish responses to preserve and encourage virtue, elements of civic humanism were merged with the defence of the principles of patriarchy. They used the language of civic humanism with caution avoiding 'any concepts that would have any radical implications, such as the definitions of liberty as the duty of each citizen to participate in political affairs' and limiting its application 'to the preservation of an already virtuous national character and an already free constitution'[36]. Quite significantly, some of the authors of the Scottish Enlightenment (such as Hume or Smith) gave preference to the protection of property rights over the active rights of civic liberty[37]. Consequently, in the Scottish Enlightenment discourse on public virtue we find a strong conservative mood exemplified in its keen support for the existing political and patriarchal order.

The potential dangers of commercial society were to be counteracted by encouraging patriotism and preserving the political order. Since political radicalism and dissent were the roots of factionalism and, hence, of anarchy and despotism, to support the political order was the same as to practice public virtue. Using the political theories of Montesquieu, Ferguson argued that the British constitution was the best political system for the nation and that radical change in the political field was most difficult to achieve. In line with the manners and disposition of the country,

---

[36] Sher, *Church and University*, p. 198.

[37] Michael Ignatieff, 'John Millar and Individualism', in Istvan Hont and Michael Ignatieff (eds.), *Wealth and Virtue. The Shaping of Political Economy in the Scottish Enlightenment* (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 317-344.

its forms of government were only open to minor change in the long-term.

Some of the authors of the Scottish Enlightenment, such as Hugh Blair, linked political conservatism with the will of God. Following the Scottish Presbyterian tradition they believed that God had a special covenant with the nation and that historical events and national problems should be interpreted as the consequence of the community's sins. These offences against the will of God were not only of a moral and religious nature, such as irreligion and fanaticism, but included, most importantly, attacks against the existing order and the abandonment of civic virtues (namely, selfishness and factionalism)[38].

Together with the political order, the traditional social order had to be supported to protect public virtue[39]. The Scottish Enlightenment provided a new support to the role of landed families through a discourse of social conservatism where the principles of patriarchy were closely mingled with political, moral and economic issues. These ideas were also spread through sermons and 'lower' literary forms such as Henry Mackenzie's novels and magazines. The privileged role of the landed nobility should be kept because they protected the bonds of the moral community by giving moral example to the lower orders of society and by performing their traditional paternalistic functions regarding the poorest members of the community. In addition, by supporting the status of landed families, the Scottish authors were

[38] Sher, *Church and University*, pp. 207-211.

[39] See Dwyer, *The Age of the Passions* and Dwyer, *Virtuous Discourse*.

also asserting the superiority of landed wealth as opposed to commerce. In order to achieve a proper economic balance and avoid the potential dangers of an excessive commercialisation of society, commercial activities should be dependent on the productivity of well-managed and large farms. Moreover, the status of aristocratic families acted as a safeguard against the spread of luxury among the lower and middling orders of society. With regard to politics, the landed nobility was considered to be 'the protection of the nation's liberties and the bulwark against both tyranny and invasion'[40].

The merging of social and political conservatism and the combination of the discourse of civic humanism with the ideology of patriarchy was ultimately carried out in the discussions regarding the Scottish militia. Following the civic humanist tradition, the Scottish authors deemed the militia as a school of public virtue that would preserve political liberties and thwart the selfish and materialistic values arising from modern, commercial societies. However, the Scottish Enlightenment's discussion of the militia issue was imbued with patriarchal principles. The Scottish authors not only defined the public values fostered by the militia in gendered terms but they also considered the militia as a means of preserving the social order. A masculine, spartan-like notion of virtue and citizenship was constantly emphasised in this debate. In Ferguson's words, one of the chief benefits of the militia would be the preservation of 'the manhood of the people' in a commercial

[40] Dwyer, *Virtuous Discourse*, p. 42.

society[41]. On the other hand, the internal organisation of the militia should reflect the existing social strata and would reinforce the *status quo* by encouraging in the lower orders of society discipline and deference to their social superiors.

However conservative the nature of the Scottish Enlightenment might be, it was not an ideology that supported an immovable maintenance of the traditional features of society. Stability was required to accomplish the necessary transformations that would lead to modernisation and improvement. Consequently, progress was not only viewed in terms of maintaining order but also in a more dynamic and creative way. The Scottish writers underlined that a virtuous society could not exist in a state of rudeness and unrefinement. Virtue was not the product of ignorance but the main outcome of the use of man's reason and, as history proved, morality was more likely to be found in the most advanced stages of humanity. As a result, the Scottish Enlightenment held a firm commitment to the promotion of education, knowledge and the scientific principles among society, a task that its writers were eager to assume. Ministers and philosophers deemed themselves improvers and enlighteners of the people and endowed their writings and sermons with a didactic and practical nature. They severely condemned fanaticism and superstition and the education of youth became one of their main concerns, to which numerous texts were dedicated. The literature on education was aimed at the enlightenment of the young and the preservation of their natural innocence and morals and combined

[41] Quoted in Sher, *Church and University*, p. 238.

affectionate methods with an equal emphasis on control and discipline[42].

Sensibility and Sociability: The Moral Basis of the Community

In the Scottish Enlightenment the notion of society encompassed a wide array of meanings. The civilised, virtuous community that they encouraged included a well-regulated set of institutions, laws and government together with a proper degree of culture and the cultivation of arts and sciences. However, the practice of a polished sensibility and polite intercourse was equally important. Virtue and civilisation, therefore, sprang from man's powers of reason, but also from the refinement of sentiments. Beyond state organisation, everyday family and economic relations provided the foundations of civil society. Moreover, the Scottish philosophers valued feelings over reason in their understanding of human ethics[43].

Sensibility and sociability were considered the roots of both public and private virtue. Regarding private virtue, the stoic composure should be coupled with the cultivation of a warm attitude towards fellow men that sprang from a polite sensibility. By using the term polite sensibility, it was underlined that sensibility should be polished from its natural state as a passionate instinct into a polite and temperate sympathetic response towards

---

[42] See, for instance, John Gregory, (1774 ed.) *A Father's Legacy to his Daughters* (New York & London, 1974).

[43] For the role of sensibility in the Scottish Enlightenment see Dwyer, *Virtuous Discourse* and Dwyer, *The Age of the Passions*. See also chapter 5 of this PhD thesis.

the others. This notion of sympathy had different connotations. Hugh Blair linked it to the principles of Christianity and defined it as the suppression of the ego that allowed the individual to empathise with the feelings of the others and guide its actions by the principles of humanity and benevolence. For Adam Smith, benevolence had nothing to do with practical morality. In *Theory of the Moral Sentiments* he remarked that in their everyday actions individuals desired to be approved by their fellows, thus restraining their emotions and their interests. Accordingly, sympathy was the source of practical morality by restraining men's lowest appetites and selfish passions rather than encouraging a disinterested benevolence which, although desirable, was rarely the root of man's behaviour[44].

With regard to public virtue, sensibility was the basis of sociability, a polite social intercourse through which the bonds of the community were maintained and forged, counteracting the dangers of a modern and luxurious society. Sociability was the source and the public outcome of sensibility: it was the product of human sympathies at a large scale and the place where polite sensibility was developed and perfected. The Scottish authors emphasised the importance of sensibility to soften the coldness of the virtues of the civic humanist tradition and reconcile the patriotic citizen with the social man.

Sensibility was a key component of the Scottish Enlightenment's notion of civilisation and even its ultimate proof.

---

[44] For a study of the role of sensibility in Adam Smith's moral system, see Dwyer, *The Age of the Passions*.

In addition, the language of sensibility was present in Scottish medical discourses, which reflected philosophical ideas on morality and society. Robert Whytt, William Cullen and John Gregory, professors at Edinburgh's Medical School, ascribed to sensibility a key function in the workings of the nervous system and used sympathy to describe the transmission of feelings between different bodily organs[45].

However, the discourse of sensibility in the Scottish Enlightenment was not free from a conservative bias. True sensibility should be particularly encouraged within the ruling elite because of their role as moral examples for the lower orders and of their paternalist duties which the Scottish writers understood as the practice of a sympathetic benevolence. Sensibility was used to legitimise the landed elite in front of the lower orders of society, who were characterised by their rusticity and lack of sensibility. Sociability could also have conservative tones and be understood as the encouragement of solidarity among the landed elite[46].

Moreover, sensibility and sociability were notions closely related to the ethos of the cultural elite of the Scottish Enlightenment. Their role as the natural custodians of society was justified by their refined sensibility and polished by their commitment with learning and virtue, while their reflection on the effects of sociability mirrored the social practices that joined the Scottish authors[47].

---

[45] See Lawrence, 'The Nervous System and Society'.

[46] See Lawrence, 'The Nervous System and Society'.

[47] Lawrence, 'The Nervous System and Society'.

Sociability and sensibility remained problematic notions for the Scottish writers. In an increasingly commercial and luxurious society, men were in danger of being driven by the follies of fashion and ostentation, falling in the excesses of the emotions, and losing their masculine stoic composure. Manhood, therefore, had to be reconciled with sensibility by restraining it with the aid of reason.

Domesticity, Women and Civilisation: Blurring Boundaries between Public and Private

The Scottish Enlightenment ascribed a central role to women, whose function in morality and civilisation was mainly articulated through the discourse of sensibility and domesticity[48].

The Discourse of Domesticity

One of the primary features of the Scottish Enlightenment was the blurring of the boundaries between public and private that often characterised eighteenth century discourses[49]. The Scottish writers were deeply suspicious of the public sphere, which they equated with the world of commerce, luxury and fashion. In response to the negative aspects of urban and courtly life that threatened to invade the sphere of private relationships, they praised private life and defined the civic public spirit 'in terms of

---

[48] John Dwyer has emphasised the significance of women in the discourse of the Scottish Enlightenment. See Dwyer, *The Age of the Passions* and Dwyer, *Virtuous Discourse*.

[49] For the relation between domesticity, sensibility and morality in the discourse of the Scottish Enlightenment, see Dwyer, *Virtuous Discourse* and Dwyer, *The Age of the Passions*.

sociability and humanity within smaller and more cohesive social groups'[50]. The small circles of family and friendship were places where sound public and private virtues were initiated and properly cultivated. Being the origin of social sympathy and intercourse, these private relations were also the ties that kept the community together. Moreover, as Blair remarked, virtuous friendships could only be cultivated outside the selfish realm of politics where all was self-interest and delusions.

Among the small groups of human relationships that configured private life, Scottish writers focused their attention on domestic circles. Despite the fact that household relations still included master-servant relationships, the Scottish authors concentrated on the family unit of parents and children[51]. The family group, in fact, was to become 'the ultimate school and safeguard of virtue'[52]. Domestic feelings were the basis of all social sympathies while a well-regulated home provided a stoic peace of mind and tranquillity. A virtuous home was also the safest protection against 'the world'; accordingly, it was systematically opposed to a set of corrupting sites, namely the court, the city or the commercial world. The apparently minor domestic virtues of order and economy were the basis of private and public morality on a large scale[53]. Family, then, came to be analogous with civil

---

[50] Dwyer, *Virtuous Discourse*, p. 98.

[51] For a study of eighteenth century aristocratic and gentry family life in relation to the rise of domesticity, see Randolph Trumbach, *The Rise of the Egalitarian Family* (New York, 1978).

[52] Dwyer, *Virtuous Discourse*, p. 105.

[53] Quite significantly, the Scottish writers attacked the figure of the bachelor, who was seen as an enemy of society, and in a similar vein campaigned against

society and it was often named 'little society' or man's 'kingdom'[54]. In sum, it can be said that in the domestic sphere lay the basis of the Scottish Enlightenment discourse, since its whole system of morality was grounded on the family.

The system of morality endorsed by the Scottish Enlightenment had, therefore, a two-fold nature. On the one hand, morality was based on reason (which allowed men to control their passions and adopt a stoic stance), and on the principles of the civic humanism, which stressed the individual's commitment with the public sphere. On the other hand, by giving preference to the private realm over the public, the Scottish Enlightenment was conferring on sensibility a chief role in morality[55].

The Scottish Enlightenment's discourse of domesticity was not free from its conservative nature. The emphasis on sensibility

---

celibacy. Celibacy was the product of luxury and an egoistic anti-social attitude which, on a more personal level, could only result in unhappiness. In addition, the Scottish authors strove to protect the family circle from external damaging influences and insisted that the best place for a happy family life was the quiet retirement of the countryside. They warned against intruders, insisting that they could ruin children's virtue and, in particular against servants, who were to be kept at a proper distance, although in the traditional terms of the patriarchal master-servant relationship. See Dwyer, *Virtuous Discourse*, pp. 107, 112.

54 The links between the social and the domestic were well grounded in the tradition of natural jurisprudence that established the origins of the government in the family, which was conceived as a smaller form of the society. See Dwyer, *Virtuous Discourse*, pp. 104 and 107, and Mary Catherine Moran, '"The Commerce of the Sexes": Civil Society and Polite Society in Scottish Enlightenment Discourse', in Frank Trentmann (ed.), *Paradoxes of Civil Society: New Perspectives on Modern German and British History* (Providence, 1999), pp. 61-84. For the influence of the tradition of natural jurisprudence in the Scottish Enlightenment and particularly in Adam Smith, see Hont and Ignatieff, 'Needs and Justice'.

55 As we have seen, Adam Smith, following Hutcheson, assigned feelings a key role in his system of morality. See, Dwyer, *The Age of the Passions* and Rendall, 'Feminizing the Enlightenment'.

as the basis of ethics was connected to 'the conviction that Scotland's elite needed to perform its paternalistic and benevolent functions within a more circumscribed sphere and to avoid becoming excessively engrossed in public affairs or the dissipation of a court inhabited by role-playing strangers'[56]. Although the Scottish Enlightenment's concern with domesticity was not restricted to the aristocracy, it was class-biased; its message was aimed at 'all above the lower ranks, all who claim the station or the feelings of a gentleman'[57]. In addition, the whole discourse of sociability was linked to the enforcement of class distinctions. The Scottish Enlightenment encouraged polite intercourse chiefly among the members of the same social station, and authors such as Fordyce[58] remarked that true friendship between the members of different ranks was almost impossible.

Women in the Discourse of Domesticity

The Scottish Enlightenment shows a dichotomy between the emphasis on reason, science and the masculine virtues of civic humanism, and the importance given to feelings in its analysis of morality, in which the notion of love played a key role[59]. Love was considered to be a positive moral force, the origin of the social affections and of the virtues that arose from polite sociability and sensibility, which strengthened the ties of the community. As such, it was also a civilising force that led humanity from the state of

---

[56] Dwyer, *Virtuous Discourse*, p. 104.

[57] Quoted from the Mirror Club in Dwyer, *Virtuous Discourse*, p. 113.

[58] Dwyer, *Virtuous Discourse*, p. 109.

[59] Dwyer, *The Age of the Passions*.

barbarity to civility. In the light of this appreciation of love, the family achieved a new moral significance because love was firstly found and forged in the family circle. As a result, the authors of the Scottish Enlightenment, especially the conjectural historians, devoted many of their texts to praise the benefits of domesticity and analyse its origins and formation in the process of civilisation. In addition, their sermons and the current Scottish magazines exalted the blessings of family life.

Similarly, the Scottish Enlightenment, through the works of authors such as Blair and Fordyce, commended the marital bond and advocated a family model based on mutual affection. Children should be educated with a firm but loving attitude, and the parent-child relation should be grounded not on harsh authority but on warm affection. Marriage should be guided by an affectionate attachment and not by material profit or sudden sexual drive. Love was not a passion but the product of a long-term affection and, though its sexual component was occasionally recognised, it was by and large seen as a mental rather than sexual attachment. The marital bond should be established in more equal terms, based on mutual friendship and companionship that could even overcome an unequal social origin.

The Scottish writers endorsed the domestic ideal on men who were encouraged to practice chastity, respect their wives and regard them as their friends. They remarked that all the moral benefits that arose from love would turn into corruption if not properly controlled at marriage, turning love from a mere sexual drive into warm, temperate affection. In this way, they strived to soften the masculine ethos of the landed and middle classes,

leading them to a more contained form of family life and preventing them from the dangers of the fashionable world, where love assumed the shape of gallantry.

However, the discourse of love was essentially directed to women and mainly expounded in the prescriptive works of authors such as Fordyce and Gregory[60]. It paid especial attention to the restraint of female passions and, accordingly, it placed chastity as the most important female virtue. Before marriage, women were encouraged not to be deceived by impulsive inclinations or by the lure of gallantry which would surely prove the sources of marital unhappiness. Women were also primarily responsible for softening the passions of love in men and for marital success. They were compelled to cultivate the qualities of complacency, delicacy, and softness which they needed to sympathise with their husband and soften his sterner character. In order to secure a happy marriage, women should please the husband, look after the children and manage the family household, becoming skilled in the domestic virtues of order and economy. They were reminded that virtuous behaviour, common sense and the dominion of the arts of pleasing were more important than physical beauty or fashionable accomplishments which in the long-term will certainly prove to be an unstable basis for the marital bond.

Therefore, in spite of the Scottish Enlightenment's claims to an increasing equality between the sexes, women were deemed almost solely responsible for the fulfilment of their program of domesticity that was, in addition, formulated in dissimilar terms for

---

[60] See Gregory, *A Father's Legacy*.

women. Women's function in marriage was to please while men were to be pleased and, for women, the stoic notion of self-dominion was carried one step further, they should achieve a self-restraint that would not only account for their individual inner peace but also for the domestic peace and the contentment of their husbands.

Female virtue became also gendered in Smith's theories of morality, who remarked that sympathy was not enough to preserve chastity. Since it was essential to secure the legitimacy of the offspring and women were less concerned with the public good, chastity should be protected through the development in women's minds of sound feelings of shame and modesty and a careful examination on the part of others.

The stress on controlling and disciplining women was not only a means of securing the legitimacy of the offspring but was also linked to the moral function of marriage. Fordyce remarked that marriage was a sacred bond due to its religious significance and, primarily, to its social implications. Lack of respect for the sanctity of the marital bond was the seed of the moral and social disintegration of the community. In order to prevent this and by placing the stress on women, Fordyce reinforced the existing patriarchal structure and re-elaborated the idea of male superiority[61]. He turned the domestic role of women into a moral and even social imperative which, moreover, was justified by the natural inequality of the sexes. Women should yield completely to their husband's will and judgement because their reasoning abilities

[61] Dwyer, *The Age of the Passions*, p. 127.

were less developed and less suitable for intellectual achievements. On the other hand, female sexuality was silenced and even transformed into a weapon against women, becoming the ultimate measure of their morals, while female sociability was restricted and confinement at home enforced. As Dwyer remarks, 'if such values as equality, independence and erudition were to be sacrificed at the altar of love, friendship and social harmony, then so be it'[62].

The Discourse of Sensibility and the Civilising Process: Women in Conjectural History

As we have seen, the Scottish Enlightenment's discourse of domesticity defined women as agents of morality whose ambit was circumscribed, to a certain extent, to the private realm of the family. Nevertheless, in its historical writings, the Scottish Enlightenment also conceived of women as instruments of virtue and civilisation whose beneficial influence was exerted through polite intercourse.

Civilisation was the result of a complex process, in which a wide range of factors intervened. However, the Scottish Enlightenment, with its characteristic blend of reason and feelings, bestowed a great importance on the perfection of individual and social feelings and, therefore, the Scottish accounts of civilisation

[62] Dwyer, *The Age of the Passions*, p. 132. However, even in this gendered ground, the authors of the Scottish Enlightenment presented differences in their treatment of women in marriage. Novels such as *The Gentle Shepherd* by Allan Ramsay reflected a more open attitude towards women who were depicted as independent and fully developed characters and encouraged to use their reason together with their natural charms. In this book women practised an active, thoughtful virtue which was not reduced to keeping their chastity and being utterly submissive to their husbands. See Dwyer, *The Age of the Passions*, p. 104-111.

focused on custom and family life. As different historical examples proved, material, institutional and artistic accomplishments could be coupled with an extreme rudeness in manners and, therefore, these societies could not be considered more than barbarians. Besides, if private and public virtue were based on polite sociability and refined sensibility, their sources should be considered when analysing the civilising process. The emphasis on feelings and manners was also connected to the fear that increased wealth would lead to moral breakdown.

Together with family life and social manners, the situation of women and their role became a recurrent theme in the writings on the origins and evolution of society. Therefore, as several authors have pointed out[63], Scottish conjectural history challenged one of the traditional assumptions regarding Enlightenment discourse: the dichotomy between nature and culture in which nature was identified with women and men with culture and reason[64]. In the works of Millar, Kames, Robertson and Alexander himself this dichotomy was reversed. Men were associated with nature, rudeness and violent passions while women were connected with refinement and civilisation. Women's condition was deemed one of the main indicators of the degree of civilisation that a society had achieved; consequently, one of the essential characteristics of primitive societies was the mistreatment of women. Moreover, the evolution of women's condition in the path towards civilisation

63 Sylvana Tomaselli, 'The Enlightenment Debate on Women', *History Workshop Journal*, 20, (1985), pp. 101-124.

64 On this dichotomy, see Cristina Molina Petit, *Dialéctica feminista de la Ilustración* (Madrid, 1994).

was often conceived as a process of liberation from a former state of slavery. Similarly, in Europe, several authors, such as Montesquieu, Rousseau and Diderot, identified women's situation as a mark of the general progress of society. The novels of sentiment that flourished in Scotland (Mackenzie) and in Europe delved into the connections between women and the refinement of the passions.

But women were also a civilising driving force, due to their role within the family and to their nature, predisposed to sensibility and softness. Since they were primarily responsible for family happiness, the proper fulfilment of their duties as mothers, wives and daughters sustained and promoted the virtuous nature of the community and its members. Women played a key function in the formation of the character of citizens for they were in charge of the education of children. The fulfilment of the domestic ideal was considered a main advancement towards civilisation and was not entirely women's responsibility. Men should lay the foundations that made possible the domestic ideal: respect for women and equality between the sexes. Therefore, men were frequently blamed for subjecting women to their tyrannical authority, hindering the cultivation of women's minds and regarding women as their slaves or as mere instruments of sensual pleasure. When compared to the prescriptive books on education and family life, Scottish conjectural historians elaborated the discourse of domesticity in better terms for women, whose intellectual advancement was constantly encouraged.

Due to their nature, closer to refinement and sensibility, women's influence on society resulted in the advancement of

civility and politeness, through the softening of men's passions and the refinement of social habits. The social intercourse between the sexes was considered one of the main features and sources of civilisation. While the discourse of domesticity and, particularly, the prescriptive literature on education and family mostly confined women to domestic boundaries, Scottish conjectural history allowed women a wider sphere of action. Hence, the confinement of women was considered the main feature of barbarous societies and of the depraved Eastern nations.

However, the 'commerce of the sexes' also constituted a potential threat of moral corruption, effeminacy and political tyranny, and paralleled the risk posed by material improvement: it was a source of progress but could easily degenerate into moral decay. The Scottish authors stressed that the intercourse between the sexes should be well balanced, following the principles of decorum, chastity and modesty. The lack of decorum could only bring about, on the one hand, the 'promiscuous intercourse' of the primitive societies while, on the other, an excess of refinement gave rise to the moral ills derived from gallantry and artificiality. Moreover, the principles of decorum were mainly beneficial for women and associated with respect for the female sex.

Therefore, the tension between progressivism and conservatism was also evident in the discussion of the role of women. Though the Scottish Enlightenment established a close relationship between women and culture, women remained strongly connected to and defined by nature rather than by culture.

As Tomaselli argues, the emphasis on the women-culture relationship did not exclude the maintenance of the women-nature

connection. Each dualism was present in different orders of knowledge: while the women-culture view pertained to the exploration of society and custom, the women-nature thesis 'is presented within a cluster of assumptions about theoretical knowledge and natural science'[65]. Therefore, in conjectural history, women were defined by their natural traits, which were constant regardless of time and place. Women in primitive societies had the same innate qualities shared by modern women, however hidden they might be due to the hardship of their condition, and maternal instinct, unlike paternal, was considered to be innate. The process of civilisation scarcely resulted in a perfection of women's character; it was women's situation which was improved. Furthermore, women played an essentially passive role in the improvement of their situation and the civilising process. Even if 'women inspire and enable the growth and maturation of male sentiments'[66], women's condition was improved because men increasingly appreciated their innate qualities. Active female involvement in the improvement of their conditions was, thus, invariably disparaged or condemned. What is more important, women were advised not to lose their essential traits of softness and delicacy, which were the means to influence men to their benefit. In addition, as Moran remarks, the immutability of their nature rendered women not fully civilised, in an intermediate state between civilisation and savagery, because while men moved forward to civility by performing a wider range of activities and

[65] Tomaselli, 'The Enlightenment Debate on Women', p. 105.

[66] Moran, '"The Commerce of the Sexes"', p. 74.

perfecting their character, women remained defined by their instinctive refinement.

According to Moran, the limitations assigned to women in the process of civilisation were closely connected to another patriarchal feature: 'the growth of proprietary interest in women'[67]. A decisive step in the path towards civilisation was the emergence of a proprietary interest in women which marked the transition from savagery to further degrees of civility, where the free intercourse of the sexes was restrained and monogamy instituted. The growth of private property was connected to the ownership of women: the progress in manners and morality prompted by monogamy was paralleled by the material advancement promoted by private property.

Additionally, Scottish works on conjectural history had a prescriptive, if subtle, character. As Moran argued, 'the historization of the male personality in conjectural history clearly involved the naturalisation of a domestic character for women'[68]. History was used as a moral example for women who were encouraged to cultivate certain virtues and to fulfil their moral, although passive, role in society. By repeatedly paying attention to primitive societies and Eastern nations, women were warned that, as the improvement of their condition was one of the main outcomes of civilisation, the destruction of civil society and the loss of the bonds of civility could only result in their enslavement and debasement. Without the respect for women that arose from

[67] Moran, '"The Commerce of the Sexes"', p. 72.

[68] Moran, '"The Commerce of the Sexes"', p. 74.

refinement, men would have no restraint to exert their physical superiority over women, subjecting them to their lowest appetites and whims.

We should, finally, return to the blurring of the boundaries between the public and the private in the Scottish Enlightenment. The Scottish Enlightenment placed women and family, the two primary elements of the private sphere, at the heart of its analysis of society. The family was the foundation of society and the place where social affections and private and public virtue were acquired while women, through their role in family and social intercourse, were promoters of civilisation and refined sociability. Moreover, female confinement to the private sphere of the household resulted in the political enslavement of men, as oriental nations exemplified. Therefore, the Scottish Enlightenment challenged the closed boundaries between the private and public sphere that has been commonly identified as a characteristic of the eighteenth century ideology of femininity.

As several authors have emphasised, the meanings of the elements of the private and public division were not exclusive and, besides, were subject to constant renegotiation. This was particularly relevant in the eighteenth century because, as Brewer suggests, the private was often represented by the public sphere which, in this period was still being formed. Accordingly, although the private came to be increasingly associated with the domestic by the end of the century, it also referred to any activity that was not directly concerned with the management of the affairs of the nation and, opposed to the political ties of citizenship, it remained

associated with the private forms of sociability upon which the public sphere of opinion was formed[69].

Although the Scottish Enlightenment broadened the scope of women's role by placing them 'at the centre of what variously termed "society", "company" and "polite society"', women still remained in the private sphere of non-political sociability, as it was understood in the eighteenth century[70]. Women's loss of freedom was never an issue for the Scottish authors, even if one of the main concerns in the Scottish texts about the rise of civil society was to justify how the loss of men's original liberty in the movement from savagery towards further degrees of civilisation was compensated by the countless benefits of association. Even though some authors, such as Millar, reflected on issues of female participation in communal affairs and matriarchy in past societies, they considered it a trait of savagery[71]. Women were always conditioned by their lack of physical strength, which made them constantly dependent on men's will and, thus, disqualified as bearers of political rights whose main precondition was independence.

---

[69] See Brewer, 'This, That and the Other'; Lawrence Klein, 'Gender and the Public/Private Distinction in the Eighteenth Century: Some Questions about Evidence and Analytic Procedure', *Eighteenth Century Studies*, 29, (1995), pp. 97-109; Dwyer, *Virtuous Discourse*, p. 96; Rendall, 'Women and the Public Sphere' and Jane Rendall, 'Nineteenth Century Feminism and the Separation of Spheres: Reflections on the Public/Private Dichotomy', in Tayo Andreasen and *et al.* (eds.), *Moving on. New Perspectives on the Women's Movement.* (Aarhus, 1990), pp. 17-37.

[70] Moran, '"The Commerce of the Sexes"', p. 76.

[71] See John Millar, (1779 ed.) *The Origin of the Distinction of Ranks,* repr. in Lehmann, W. C., *John Millar of Glasgow, 1735-1801. His Life and his Contribution to Sociological Analysis* (Glasgow, 1960), section II.

CONSERVATISM AND PROGRESSIVISM IN THE *HISTORY OF WOMEN*

The *History of Women* was representative of Scottish conjectural histories. As such, it did not consist only of an account of the evolution of the female condition; it also involved an enquiry on progress, its relation to women's improvement, and its reconciliation with morality. Throughout its pages, the discourses of the Scottish Enlightenment (sensibility, domesticity, stoicism and civic humanism) were displayed to explore the position of women in advancing and securing the foundations of civil society. Yet Scottish concerns were frequently coupled with broader debates about gender relations and femininity, whose main themes, female nature, education, equality and rights, were also reflected in the book. These different conceptions often came into conflict, producing contradictions and an underlying tension between progressivism and conservatism, which was also indebted to the Scottish Enlightenment tradition.

Female Nature, Education and Duties: Equality vs. Sensibility

The *History of Women* involved an enquiry into women's nature and capacities. In a chapter strongly influenced by the tradition of the *querelle des femmes*, Alexander dealt with the current discussion on female mental capacities and, unlike Kames[72], affirmed that

[72] 'The man as a protector is directed by nature to govern: the woman, conscious of inferiority, is disposed to obey. The intellectual powers correspond to the destination of nature: men have penetration and solid judgement to fit

'[women are] not at all inferior in abilities of mind to the other sex, and even scarcely inferior to them [men] in strength of body'[73]. Following the spirit of the *querelle*, he remarked that 'the difference of education and of the mode of living are the principal causes of the corporeal and mental differences which distinguish the sexes from each other'[74]. Education was, indeed, a main concern for Alexander to which he devoted a chapter[75]. He supported a better education for women and linked the availability of education for women with the advancement of the female condition in history. Alexander's position was, however, contradictory regarding women's intellectual instruction. Although he encouraged women's rational cultivation, he affirmed that education should be rather directed to usefulness and should not neglect domestic duties. Overall his encouragement of the development of female rationality through education was directed to make women more suitable for domestic marital life based upon friendship, since 'that friendship cannot exist unless it is built upon the foundation of reason and sense'[76]. A proper education was necessary, moreover, to secure a long-lasting attachment in marriage since love based on beauty alone was as transient as beauty itself.

---

them for governing: women have sufficient understanding to make a decent figure under good government'. Lord Kames, (1778 ed.) 'Of the Progress of the Female Sex', *Sketches of the History of Man* (London, 1993), p. 3.

[73] William Alexander, (1782 ed.) *The History of Women. From the Earliest Antiquity to the Present Time* (Bristol, 1995), Vol. 2, p. 49.

[74] Alexander, *History of Women, II*, p. 57.

[75] See Alexander, *History of Women, I*, chapter 2.

[76] Alexander, *History of Women, I*, p. 73.

Even if Alexander affirmed that, theoretically, women were endowed with the same mental capacities as men, he was reluctant that women should be allowed the full exercise of those capacities in practice. His defence of women's mental equality went with the assertion that 'nature seems not to have intended them for the more intense and severe studies'[77]. He severely condemned female pedantry and remarked that the education of women should avoid the pursuit of fame and admiration. To deal with this contradiction he resorted to the dialectic between culture and nature. In the development of female minds, like in the process of civilisation, real improvement involved the development of reason and sensibility. Women's education should address reason without neglecting and, even worse, spoiling their delicate sensibility.

The issue of female physical weakness was also illustrative of Alexander's paradoxes. He remarked that female weakness was 'only the result of art' and of the contemporary mode of living; when they needed it, such as in primitive societies, women could be as strong as men and capable of heroic deeds[78]. However, female exertions of this kind 'are beauties even in the character of the softer sex, when they proceed from necessity; when from choice, they are blemishes of the most unnatural kind' and they 'would divest them of one of the qualities for which we love (…) and value them'[79]. Female nature, then, consisted mainly in a

---

[77] Alexander, *History of Women, I*, p. 87.

[78] See Alexander, *History of Women, II*, p. 57. The stress on the influence of living conditions over the individual's sensibility and capacities reflected the medical ideas taught in Scotland at the same time that Alexander attended the University of Edinburgh. See Lawrence, 'The Nervous System and Society'.

[79] Alexander, *History of Women, II*, p. 107 and p. 108.

normative femininity, suited to men's preferences and, only secondarily, in the development of their innate capacities.

Alexander drew upon the discourse of sensibility whose gendered expression has been already mentioned in the Scottish context. Women were characterised by acuteness of feelings and weakness that prevented them from intense efforts of body and mind. Different natures were followed by different virtues proper to each sex. Men's virtues were derived from courage and from sensibility, as it was prescribed by the Scottish Enlightenment in its elaboration of the discourse of civic humanism through the language of sensibility. Women's virtues, by contrast, stemmed from modesty, their capital virtue:

> at the head of the qualities, which make up the good or bad character of each sex, there is generally placed some cardinal virtue, or vice; which is set, as it were, in the fore-ground; and to which all the rest of the figures in the group are subordinate. Thus, what is the most highly esteemed in the men, is courage and sensibility. What gives the highest lustre and polish to the women, is modesty, joined to that soft and gentle temper, which is ever ready to sooth affliction, and to pity distress[80].

Alexander's account points out the normative side of the discourse of sensibility, its function in controlling female sexuality and the connections between sensibility and physical constitution. Quite significantly, female modesty, the fundamental trait of womanhood, was also called delicacy and defined as an 'unaffected timidity and shyness of manners'[81] that was innate in women but

[80] Alexander, *History of Women, I*, p. 332.

[81] Alexander, *History of Women, II*, p. 1.

'requires culture to expand'[82] and achieve perfection. Securing chastity and controlling female sexuality demanded the workings of delicacy, 'the sentinel that is placed over female virtue, and that sentinel once overcome, chastity is more than half subdued'[83].

For Alexander, as in Rousseau and prescriptive literature, the different nature of each sex determined the different spheres of action for men and women. As he stated, 'each sex has its particular qualities and is fitted by the author of nature for accomplishing different purposes'[84]. Because of their different natures,

> in the articles of convenience and necessity, we [men] have greatly the advantage over the women, who, naturally rely on us for whatever is useful and whatever is necessary. In the articles of pleasure and refinement, they have as much the advantage of us, and we as naturally look up to them as the source of our pleasures, as they do to us as the source of their sustenance and their fortunes[85].

In Alexander's account, women were defined as carers and nurturers, their proper duties being the domestic tasks and the nursing of children:

> the most tender care and anxious solicitude for their infant offspring, is an innate idea throughout the wide extent of the animal creation, much more strongly imprinted on the minds of females than of males. (...)

---

[82] Alexander, *History of Women, II*, p. 7.

[83] Alexander, *History of Women, II*, p. 5.

[84] Alexander, *History of Women, II*, p. 55.

[85] Alexander, *History of Women, II*, p. 111.

> were we to judge from analogy, whether every women should nurse her own children, we should find it to be a duty from which she could hardly exempt herself; as almost the whole of the birds and the beasts perform this task to their own young. Were we to judge from the history of man, we should find, that in almost all nations it has been the common practice; though to that practice, like all other general rules, there have been many exceptions. (...) It invariably takes place at this day in every nation, where culture has not degenerated into vice, and where the voice of nature is stronger than that of pleasure[86].

In modern commercial societies, moreover, the unsuitability of women's nature for earning subsistence was reinforced by the need to protect their virtue:

> to launch out into trade and commerce would require, perhaps, more industry, and more steady efforts of mind, than are consistent with their volatile natures and finer feelings and would, besides, expose them to many assaults, which even the severest virtue might not always be able to repel[87].

In sum, it could be said that in his reflection on female nature, Alexander tried to reconcile scientific knowledge and the discourse of sensibility. As a physician, he was familiar with the new anatomical research which dismissed female inequality on biological grounds, and supported mental and physical equality in women. However, under the influence of the discourse of sensibility, he gave preference to the cultural construction of gender over the biological similarities between the sexes. The confluence of the discourses of science and sensibility is

[86] See Alexander, *History of Women, I*, p. 136 and p. 142-143.

[87] Alexander, *History of Women, II*, p. 434.

underlined by his different usages of the notion of nature. When dealing with female equality, nature was identified with female biological capacities, in accordance with scientific research. In relation to women's duties, nature was the cultural and socially accepted construction of gender. Eventually, Alexander opted for this gender biased notion of nature that defined femininity according to male preferences and, as we shall see, so as to preserve private and public morality.

Female Progress: Civilisation and Refinement

In Alexander's book, female progress ran parallel to general progress, being the product of the same features that brought forward refinement in civil society. Its main basis was the improvement of economic conditions, which produced a higher degree of leisure and commodities and, consequently, a greater attention to the pleasures of sociability, learning and intercourse between the sexes. Improved material conditions relieved women from the toils and hardships to which they were subjected in savage societies, while female qualities were increasingly valued and respected. The birth of agriculture and private property led men to settle in communities and this 'association becomes productive of softer manners and more engaging deportment'[88].

Alexander, then, reflected the Scottish Enlightenment's emphasis on sociability and sympathy regarding the advancement of refinement and civility. He distinguished the mere scholars and the men of business from the men of civility, whose refined

[88] Alexander, *History of Women, I*, p. 160.

sensibility and manners were the product of the intercourse with women, and to whom he gave preference. In Alexander's account the civic humanist tradition was also present. He shared its identification of liberty with the public good ('in Europe, where liberty is generally founded on social and rational principles, calculated for the good of the community'[89]) and echoed the main role of property in its conceptions of citizenship (based on the independence that stemmed from property) and community (defined as a network of households bound together by the relations that sprang from land possession)[90].

The polishing of social affections and social intercourse resulted in the refinement of love, a 'social and benevolent passion' that, 'being compounded of all the tender, of all the humane and disinterested virtues, it calls forth at once all their soft ideas and exerts all their good offices'[91]. Love could only be properly refined in civil life, as the barbarous customs of savage societies pointed out. While there love remained a mere appetite incapable of forging long and tender affections, in civil societies it became 'a mixture of animal appetite and sentimental feeling' and the source of affectionate steady attachments between the sexes[92]. From the refinement of love, plentiful benefits arose for women who were protected and respected not only by their closest acquaintances but

89 Alexander, *History of Women, I*, p. 500.

90 Alexander, *History of Women, I*, p. 492.

91 Alexander, *History of Women, II*, p. 205.

92 Alexander, *History of Women, I*, p. 329.

also, due to the spread of politeness, by the civil society as a whole. It is worth quoting Alexander extensively on this topic:

> we must carefully distinguish between that love, which, in civil life, is a mixture of animal appetite and sentimental feeling; and that which, in savage life, is animal appetite only. The last, though it may prompt by its immediate impulse, to be fawning and complaisant, is but short and inconstant in its operations; and, consequently, unable to restrain the rudeness and oppression of the men, or raise the women to any degree of consequence and dignity. The first, more steady and uniform, inspires with an unremitting attention to do good offices, with a generosity of sentiment, and with an inclination to protect, and screen from oppression the weakness which savages despise. Nor are the fair regarded and defended only by such individuals as are connected with them by love, friendship, and other motives of passion and interest; but by the generality of men in civil life, from sentiments of gallantry; and by every wise legislature, which, in proportion to the weakness of that sex, exerts itself the more strenuously to protect their persons and interests[93].

In these conditions, marriage became more favourable for women. The institution of marriage was considered by Alexander a fundamental step forward in the improvement of women's situation. It provided them with protection and raised their status, by acquiring the social position of the husband. In his enquiry on the origins of marriage, he denied that monogamous marriage arose from nature or by the designs of Providence, as Kames had maintained[94]. Following Millar, Alexander identified usage,

---

[93] Alexander, *History of Women, I*, p. 329.

[94] 'Matrimony, therefore, or pairing, is so necessary to the human race, that it must be natural and instinctive. (...) When other races are so amply provided for, can it be seriously thought, that Providence is less attentive to the human race?'. Kames, 'Of the Progress of the Female Sex', p. 11.

affection, and the need to provide for the offspring as the origin of the first marital arrangements. Since it was subjected to countless variations, he remarked that only the mutual attraction between the sexes was set by nature, 'while it [nature] left it to the laws of each country to institute the ceremonies of their junction'[95]. These dispositions were generally disadvantageous for women, especially polygamy which became the negative counterpart of domestic marriage:

> in countries where women are confined, the compact entered into between husband and wife, if it can be called a compact, is only an act of power on the part of the husband and parents of the bride, and of passive obedience on her side. The husband, therefore, has no great reason to expect that she will pay the same regard to this compact, as if it had been made by the voluntary agreement of all parties; sensible on this account, that her mind may be differently disposed of from her body, he does all that mortal can do, he secures the latter by perpetual confinement. But this mode of treating women is the vilest indignity that can be offered to human beings; it presupposes them neither endowed with virtue nor free agency, and places them in the same point of view with an unoccupied field, which yields itself indifferently to the possession of anyone, who will be at the pains to secure and fence it. It likewise presupposes the men to be with regard to the women, what they are to the beasts of the field, absolute masters of every one whom they can catch and detain[96].

However, even monogamy could be adverse to women's well-being, as in those societies where the growing refinement of sensibility had not yet brought about a marital relationship based

[95] See Alexander, *History of Women, II*, pp. 270-71 and Millar, *The Origin of the Distinction of Ranks*.

[96] Alexander, *History of Women, II*, p. 28-29.

on mutual consent, affection, companionship and equality between the spouses. In short, it was not until the establishment of domesticity that marriage involved a real improvement for women's condition.

All these aspects that characterised women's progress could be found separately in several societies of the past. Nevertheless, it was not until the arrival of commercial societies, where material conditions and sensibility advanced to a greater extent, that all these features appeared together. Only in Europe did '[women] possess the consequence to which they seem entitled by nature in the scale of intelligent beings'[97]. However there were differences between European countries. Northern Europe was more polished than Southern Europe and, among all, Britain was deemed superior[98].

Following the Scottish conjectural tradition, Alexander did not consider the betterment of women's situation as a mere by-product of the civilising process. Women were also agents of improvement. Their nature was associated with refinement and sensibility, while men's nature was considered to be closer to savagery. Women were endowed with a more generous proportion of softness, sympathy, humanity and modesty than men. The intercourse with women, which allowed their refined faculties to

---

[97] Alexander, *History of Women, I*, p. 300.

[98] This distinction should be examined in the light of the eighteenth century formation of national identities and of the Scottish Enlightenment's efforts to reconcile a Scottish character while supporting the Union. For the relation between the formation of national identities and women's past in Scottish conjectural history, see Rendall, 'Tacitus Engendered' and Rendall, 'Clio, Mars and Minerva'.

operate over men's rougher nature, was one of the chief incentives to human progress. In Alexander's words,

> woman (…) was not intended solely to propagate and nourish the species, but to form us for society, to give an elegance to our pleasures, to sooth our afflictions, and to soften our cares. Of all the various causes which influence our conduct, our feelings, and our sentiments, none operate so powerfully as the society of women[99].

Besides, 'each [sex], in its proper sphere, has contributed nearly, in an equal proportion, to this great and valuable purpose [civilisation]'[100]. Because of their civilising role, women's identification with reproduction was lessened.

Alexander dealt extensively with the issue of female influence on society[101], from which countless benefits arose. The company of women led men to exert themselves to please and be agreeable, prompting politeness of manners and acquisitions of mind; female company softened men's passions, encouraged social harmony and the development of arts and sciences:

> man, secluded from the company of women, is not only a rough and uncultivated, but a dangerous, animal to society. (...) This society [with women] teaches the men to regulate and govern their passions with greater propriety, as nothing can be more certain, than that rape, adultery, and every evil that follow them, are more common in countries where the sexes live separate, than where they enjoy the company of each other.

---

[99] Alexander, *History of Women, I*, p. 475.

[100] Alexander, *History of Women, II*, p. 53.

[101] See Alexander, *History of Women, I*, chapter 14.

> there is nothing by which the happiness of individuals and society is so much promoted, as by constant efforts to please; and these efforts are in great measure only produced by the company of women. For men, by themselves, relax in almost every particular of good-breeding and complaisance, and appear the creatures of mere nature; but no sooner a woman appear, than the scene is changed, and they become emulous to show all their good qualities. Women, when by themselves, likewise relax in all the arts of pleasing, take less care of their dress, and of their persons, but if a man is introduced, they are assiduous to engage his attention by every art that can give lustre to their persons, and a gracefulness to their manners[102].

Polite intercourse with women was, therefore, productive of every single trait that characterised human advancement. It was the source of private virtues, such as the domestic virtues of the family, of stoic temperance and of the refinement of individual sensibility. Common good and public virtue were the effect of beneficial female influence because it resulted in the progress of reason and knowledge, in the preservation of the bonds of the community, by preventing disputes and promoting polite sociability, and in the general refinement of manners and affections that characterised polished nations.

However, there were differences between women and men. Men's path towards progress involved the development of proper degrees of sensibility through the softening of their natural qualities. By contrast, for women, it involved an increasing concession to the display of their innate faculties. Alexander associated female progress with the value men bestowed upon their capacities and duties and agreed with Millar when he said:

---

[102] Alexander, *History of Women, I*, p. 492-94.

'their condition is naturally improved by every circumstance which tends to create more attention to the pleasures of the sex, and to increase the value of those occupations that are suited to the female character'[103].

The Protection of Virtue: Women and the Dangers of Progress

As we have seen, Alexander shared the belief of conjectural historians in the human capacity for advancement and in the superiority of European commercial societies over past and contemporary nations. He denied Stuart's longing for the past when he said that 'such, among many, is the partiality of admiring whatever is past, and despising whatever is present, that every thing stamped with the rust of remote antiquity must infallibly be good and virtuous and every thing of a modern date as unquestionably insignificant and vicious'[104]. Even so, Alexander regarded current progress as unstable and susceptible to corruption when he wrote that 'the improvement of society improves also the arts of fraud and dissimulation'[105].

Alexander, therefore, shared the Scottish uneasiness about the preservation of public and private virtue in the face of increasing commercialisation. This anxiety was articulated by blending the language of civic humanism, with its emphasis on the public good and on the protection of the ties of the community, and the

---

[103] Millar, *The Origin of the Distinction of Ranks*, p. 203.

[104] Alexander, *History of Women, I*, p. 467-68.

[105] Alexander, *History of Women, II*, p. 314.

discourse of Stoicism, which focused on the implications of the characteristics of market societies in the control of individual passions[106].

Material improvement and the intercourse between the sexes, the main civilising forces, had an inherent potential for corruption, which, if left unrestrained, could invalidate the progress achieved. Enrichment, like progress, should be earned gradually and through the 'paths of justice'. Otherwise it 'introduced luxury and dissipation', bringing with it 'the arrogance of wealth, effeminacy of the manners, and love of pageantry and show'[107]. The domestic and social affections were destroyed by the selfish pursuit of gain and even the common good was endangered, as the Eastern nations proved.

Although the effects of luxury in contemporary societies could not be equated with those in Eastern nations, some of its consequences could be already perceived. Alexander directed his criticisms mainly against the habits of the wealthier classes, their lavish amusements and love of fashionable extravagances. By contrast, he praised the middle class, the 'most eligible of all human conditions'[108], although he lamented its growing imitation of these upper class follies. He warned against the decrease of marriages, as a consequence of the growth of self-interest, and against the use of the marital bond as a means of increasing family status. Regarding women, he lamented the popularity of useless

---

[106] See Ignatieff, 'John Millar and Individualism'.

[107] Alexander, *History of Women, I*, p. 69.

[108] Alexander, *History of Women, I*, p. 133.

accomplishments in their education and criticised the spread of fashionable amusements among the women of rank:

> if by employment we understand being occupied in such things as are useful to society, in that case, women of rank and quality, in most of the polite countries of Europe, may be struck entirely out, as having no employment at all; and should we even admit works of fancy and taste into our list of useful employments, such is the love of dissipation, that even few of these are at present executed by ladies of fashion[109].

One of the main dangers of luxury was a disregard for domestic duties and the destruction of domesticity in marriage; thus, he condemned the use of wet nurses supporting Rousseau's views on the importance of the maternal role in early stages of education:

> we should not, however, on this account, endeavour to dissuade women from the most endearing task of nursing; we persuade ourselves, that it is in most cases their duty; and if their minds are not corrupted by pursuits less natural, we flatter ourselves, that, in all cases, they will find it their greatest pleasure; especially when they consider, that by doing so they have the pledges of their connubial love constantly under their own care and direction; whereby they are safe from the severity, carelessness, and inattention of the female mercenary, who is but seldom one of the best of her sex; such being, with difficulty, prevailed upon to quit the care of her own infant, for the sake of money, unless urged to it by lawless necessity[110].

Contemporary France, where husband and wife led separate lives and marriage lacked any mutual obligation, was used to

[109] See Alexander, *History of Women, I*, p. 132.

[110] Alexander, *History of Women, I*, p. 136-37.

illustrate that luxury in commercial societies could lead to the loss of the domestic affections:

> as chastity is a virtue which does not seem to flourish in a soil, where too much or too little culture is bestowed upon it, we must not expect to find it remarkably vigorous among the French, where politeness is the first of all the virtues, and chastity hardly entitled to a place as the second. (...) The number of mistresses kept by the married as well as the single. The little discredit thrown on the profession of a prostitute (...) are proofs (...); to which we may add, the spirit of intrigue, which is fashionable among both sexes; and in France, not to be fashionable, is a condition much more dreaded, than not to be virtuous. (...)

> matrimony in France is a thing entirely different from what it is in all other parts of Europe; it does not there subject the hapless female to obedience, to duty, or even to fidelity, but gives her a right to an unbounded liberty and the fortune of her husband, while it confers on the husband hardly any right but that of calling her his wife. In fashionable life, and indeed among all the ranks, as all aspire at being fashionable, it seems to be a bargain entered into by a male and female to bear the same name, live in the same house, and pursue their separate pleasures without restraint or control: and so religiously is this part of the bargain kept, that both parties shape their course exactly as convenience and inclination dictate. Spurning the joys of friendship at home, and contemning the censure of the world abroad; they live in the same house, but seldom see each other, having different apartments, different sets of acquaintance, different servants, a different equipage, and different table[111].

The intercourse between the sexes was another source of moral danger. Alexander argued that 'the appetite towards the other sex is one of the strongest and more ungovernable in our

[111] See Alexander, *History of Women, I*, pp. 442-50.

nature'[112], stressing the precarious nature of the equilibrium between affection and passion that was found in polished societies. As in the case of the increase of wealth, the problem was to find a medium point that secured the necessary levels to maintain the refinement achieved, while avoiding the excesses of the East and, to a lesser extent, France. In Alexander's book as in Millar's, there was an underlying parallelism between the market and sexual intercourse. On the one hand, market freedom provided the economic background of current advancement. On the other hand, the growth of politeness and the refinement of sensibility had been possible thanks to a freer intercourse between the sexes and the freedom of choice that characterised domestic marriage. Furthermore, since progress was characterised by a gradual accessibility both to material commodities and to women, they became equated to economic goods. In the same way, unrestrained access to both could only lead to corruption.

The Scottish authors were aware that they were dealing with two of the most powerful human passions which, consequently, should be controlled. However, they were equally conscious that to prescribe a harsh condemnation of profit and sexual gratification was unrealistic, taking into account human nature and the role in the civilising process that they prescribed for these factors. As a result, and due to their belief in the limited role of law in moral reform, they resorted to custom, manners and sympathy as better means of controlling these potentially dangerous forces. Sympathy, the desire of other's approbation, not only restrained

[112] Alexander, *History of Women, II*, p. 410.

selfishness in economic activities but also generated propriety and decorum in the sexual intercourse. Through the operations of sympathy this moral restraint was easily internalised, producing a stoic self-command without the tensions between freedom of choice and external constraint that arose from legal and religious prescriptions[113].

Similarly, intercourse between the sexes and women's influence on society should be controlled. Nevertheless, Alexander was more concerned with the potential dangers of the intercourse between the sexes than with the growth of luxury, which was not only due to the fact that Alexander was dealing primarily with women's condition; it reflected the inability of the Scottish authors to deal satisfactorily with the risks that gender relations entailed. Since, as stated before, Adam Smith had proved the effectiveness of free competition and sympathy regarding economic operations, the moral problem of commercial societies lay in 'the impoverishment of social relations in the family sphere, not in the injustice of the economic sphere'[114]. As a result, Alexander, like the Scottish authors, retained a greater anxiety regarding the integrity of the private sphere of the family and gender relations which, as we have seen, was particularly susceptible to the pernicious influence of the commercial sphere.

The gendered nature of the ideology of the Scottish Enlightenment reinforced these anxieties. Alexander, like the Scottish authors, deemed women primarily responsible for the

---

[113] See Ignatieff, 'John Millar and Individualism', p. 333.

[114] Ignatieff, 'John Millar and Individualism', p. 339.

maintenance of virtue in the intercourse between the sexes and the family. Therefore his efforts to preserve private and public morality were translated into a strict control of women's behaviour and morals, stressing the conservative nature of the Scottish Enlightenment.

Due to their nature, women were less prone to take into consideration the public good because 'patriotism is a principle seldom so strong in them as in men'[115]. Besides, the acute sensibility of their nature could easily lead them to be deceived by the delusions of false gallantry, endangering their chastity and modesty, the basis of the virtuous intercourse between the sexes. As a consequence, the workings of sympathy were not enough to secure female morality. A proper sense of shame and decorum should be steadily enforced in women through different means such as religion or the mother's influence. Like Gregory, Alexander emphasised the role of education in directing female sensibility to virtue[116]. Social conventions also operated in the preservation of female chastity whose loss involved family dishonour, social isolation and scarce possibilities of getting married.

Furthermore, 'not satisfied that their women should refrain from real unchastity only, they [European nations] would not even allow of any thing that had the slightest appearance of indecorum, or that might raise improper ideas in the mind'[117]. Although

---

115 Alexander, *History of Women, I*, p. 53.

116 Rendall, 'Clio, Mars and Minerva', p. 138.

117 Alexander, *History of Women, II*, p. 42.

progress had ended women's physical confinement at home, it involved increasing control over women's minds and bodily demeanour and established a new form of confinement based on the subtleties of a code of morality in which virtue was equally important as the appearance of virtue. In Alexander there is a parallelism between female domestic imprisonment in rude societies and the need, in polished societies, for women to conceal their true feelings and even capacities (such as in his critique of pedantry), in order to conform to the established notions of femininity and morality and to increase male attachment for them. In a similar vein to Millar, for Alexander the progress of women consisted in a progressive achievement of physical liberty at the expense of a growing distance between the sexes, in order to stimulate men's true affection, which run the risk of diminishing due to the increasing availability of women[118].

The protection of chastity also entailed a stricter enforcement of the stoic command of self-control. Women 'are obliged to lay a perpetual restraint in their behaviour, and often to disclaim by their words, and even by their actions, such honest and virtuous attachments as they approve in their hearts'[119]. While in courtship men should act with 'openness and freedom', women should use 'methods silent and disguised'[120]. Openness and sincerity were sacrificed in the name of modesty, while the stoic command of

---

[118] See Millar, *The Origin of the Distinction of Ranks*, p. 213.

[119] Alexander, *History of Women, II*, p. 112.

[120] See Alexander, *History of Women, II*, p. 112.

self-control was directed to dissimulation and to the appearance of virtue instead of virtue itself.

Alexander's discussion of marriage indicated his conservative bias. Although marriage should be based on equality, women are bound tighter by the marital tie and, accordingly, women's infidelity was regarded by Alexander a higher offence than men's. He justified this moral difference resorting to female nature when he argued that 'the fair sex are, in general, formed for love; and seem impelled by nature, to fix that passion on some particular object'[121]. Alexander considered the moral double standard the logical consequence of the differences between the natures of the sexes. For the same reason, he prescribed different sources for the mutual influence of the spouses: 'though men govern by law, women may almost always govern by the arts of gentleness and persuasion'[122].

---

[121] Alexander, *History of Women, II*, p. 100.

[122] Alexander, *History of Women, I*, p. 505. Alexander's defence of the double standard was shared, for instance, by Kames: 'Matrimony between a single pair, for mutual comfort, and for procreating children, implies the strictest mutual fidelity. Adultery however is a deeper crime in the wife, than in the husband: in him it may happen occasionally, with little or no alienation of affection; but the superior modesty of the female sex is such, that a wife does not yield, till unlawful love prevails, not only over modesty, but also over duty to her husband. Adultery therefore in the wife, is a breach of the matrimonial engagement in a double respect: it is an alienation of affection from the husband, which unqualifies her to be his friend and companion; and it tends to bring a spurious issue into the family, betraying the husband to maintain and educate children that are not his own'. Kames, 'Of the Progress of the Female Sex', p. 63-64.

The Blurring of the Public/Private Distinction in the History of Women

The *History of Women* reflected the blurring of the distinctions of the public and the private in the Scottish Enlightenment. As previously mentioned, Alexander deemed elements often considered to be of a private nature, sociability and love, as the foundation of public good and morality. He assigned to domestic marriage and the influence of women in society great relevance in the maintenance of public virtue and political liberty. Although Alexander considered marriage as a private and affectionate arrangement between two people, he also emphasised its public nature. Marriage was a civil covenant, established alongside other institutions that provided the basis of civil society, which 'stands exactly in the same light as all other transactions of a nature interesting to the public'[123]. Marriage was the foundation of civil society because it 'preserve[d] the peace of society and encourage[d] population'[124]. Without marriage 'the natural progress of multiplication would be retarded and anarchy and confusion would universally prevail among mankind'[125].

However, not all types of marital arrangements could be considered the basis of civility. Only when the principles of domesticity were developed, did marriage become the source of public benefits. In order to illustrate this, Alexander examined savage societies where moral corruption went hand in hand with a

---

123 Alexander, *History of Women, II*, pp. 321, 276.

124 Alexander, *History of Women, II*, p. 270.

125 Alexander, *History of Women, II*, p. 272.

lack of family stability and affections. By paying attention to the violent Middle Ages and to the frivolous manners of contemporary France, where marriage was devoid of affectionate friendship between the spouses, Alexander pointed out that monogamy alone was not enough to firmly support the morality and stability of civil society.

The description of the morals and manners of Eastern nations is particularly useful for exploring the blurring of private and public distinctions in the *History of Women*. Alexander found the polygamy of Eastern societies illustrative of the ills that arose from the absence of domesticity. In these societies, women were bought and sold like animals and confined to the harems, where they were the slaves of a tyrannical husband:

> the women of Asia are, in general, only a kind of cyphers [sic], held up to be the sport of fortune; educated in a manner that tends only to debase their minds, by obliterating their virtues; deprived of personal liberty; sold, or given away in marriage, without a power of refusal; liable to be seized on as part of the goods and chattels of their husbands, for their debts; torn with jealousy and chagrin, even their pleasures are joyless, and in a few years their youth and beauty being over, their period of long and unsupportable neglect commences.

> the women may there repine in secret, but they must clothe their features with cheerfulness when their lord appears; contumacy only draws down on them immediate punishment; they are degraded, chastised, divorced, shut up in dark dungeons; and even put to death, according to the degree of their crime, or the indignation they have excited: their friends may murmur in secret at their fate; but there is

> no redress in the laws of their country, nor does public justice take any cognizance of the affairs of the Haram[126].

The harem was not only a negative metaphor of the lack of domesticity, it also meant the lack of free intercourse between the sexes and of women's influence on society. Without the beneficial effects of the latter, a proper refinement of the passions and social affections could not be attained and, consequently, public and private corruption prevailed. Regarding virtue, Alexander, following the orientalist tradition, traced two important parallelisms. On the one hand, male moral corruption reflected the corruption of female nature, spoiled by confinement, by lack of education and by their role as instruments of pleasure. On the other hand, the morality of the political body reflected the morals of the household. As in the Scottish Enlightenment and the civic humanist tradition, Alexander conceived the family circle as a small version of society which shared its features at a greater scale.

This double correspondence was relevant to explain the despotic nature of Eastern political authority[127]. The tyrannical rule of the husband in the harem was 'the same despotism in miniature, which prevails in the state; and has the same effect upon the passions, reducing them all under the dominion of fear'[128]. Consequently the confinement of women entailed the political enslavement of men: 'liberty and independence, the most

---

[126] Alexander, *History of Women, I*, p. 291 and 288.

[127] On the eighteenth century usages of the harem as a metaphor for political despotism, see Alain Grosrichard, *Estructura del harén. La ficción del despotismo asiático en el Occidente clásico* (Barcelona, 1979).

[128] Alexander, *History of Women, I*, p. 288.

inestimable blessings of mankind, are no where at so low an ebb, as in the countries where the women have no political influence and where the men keep almost no company with them'[129].

Paradoxically, the lack of female influence on society, together with the effects of luxury, produced effeminacy among men. Eastern effeminacy meant the loss of all political liberties, which in the discourse of civic humanism were strongly associated with manliness. This also involved the loss of all traits that defined masculinity, namely temperance, courage and strength. In addition, political emasculation had a physical counterpart embodied in the figure of the eunuch[130]. Thus, in Alexander's account of Eastern debauchery the public and the private were constantly negotiated and displaced. Marriage and women, traditionally associated with the private domain, were given political and public consequence. However, the insistence on the effeminacy of the East also reinforced the identification of women with the private realm, defined as non-political and dependent. Similar to the effeminate men of the East, women lacked self-command and determination, the moral qualities which defined manliness, moral soundness and citizenship.

The Reconciliation between Progressivism and Conservatism

Similarly, Alexander's position was balanced between conservatism and progressivism. He frequently coupled the rejection and the enforcement of normative notions of femininity,

---

[129] Alexander, *History of Women, I*, p. 499.

[130] See, for instance, Alexander, *History of Women, II*, p. 16.

as we have seen in the case of female education, equality and morality. Unlike Millar and more like Kames[131], Alexander advocated political and social egalitarianism: 'the time will soon come, when the interest of the public will triumph over the pride of rank and opulence. By nature, all mankind are equal. The fiat of the crowned head creates an artificial distinction'[132]. However, although Alexander might have challenged the political and social conservatism that characterised some of the authors of the Scottish Enlightenment, the *History of Women* maintained the gendered views of his Scottish contemporaries, even if some of its passages reflected the growing struggle for women's equality.

In the book, female progress was not only identified with the workings of sensibility and sympathy and the subsequent refinement of manners. The true improvement of women also rested in the achievement of equal inheritance and private property, reflecting contemporary claims for women's economic independence. He criticised the condition of women in European societies arguing that 'the external appearance of things is, however, but an unfaithful mirror, whose representation we cannot altogether depend on'[133]. In spite of the progress achieved, polished societies were still unfavourable for women, as shown in this lengthy quote:

> in Europe, for the most part, [women are] but improperly or slightly educated; and at all times kept in a state of dependence, by the restrictions of a severe legislation,

131 See Kames, 'Of the Progress of the Female Sex', p. 16 and p. 17.

132 Alexander, *History of Women, II*, p. 384.

133 Alexander, *History of Women, I*, p. 319.

> which, in the management and disposal of what property is allowed them, commonly cramps the freedom of their will. Dishonoured and disgraced beyond all possibility of redemption, by the commission of faults, which in the men are hardly considered as any thing but acts of gallantry; and even in the state of matrimony, *a state to which they naturally aspire*, more indissolubly bound than their husbands; the law affords them no relief, unless the cruel partner to whom they are tied, has attempted to take away their life; and while he may riot with impunity in adulterous amours, if the wife retaliates, by copying his example, he immediately procures a divorce, and may turn her without subsistence, to the scorn and contempt of her own sex, who, in such cases, seldom look with pity even on a repenting sinner. In all cases where honour is concerned, even the politest nations pay little regard to the sex. Titles are seldom conferred on women, they convey no honours to their husbands, and their rank and condition reflect little or no dishonour upon them[134].

Women's education was defective and they seldom received honours or titles. Alexander underlined women's lack of economic independence and called for equal inheritance, divorce in fair economic conditions and, especially, for full rights to property. He remarked that 'we find that it is only in a few of the politer countries of Europe that they are possessed of this privilege [full rights to property] and even in those with such restrictions that in many cases they can hardly enjoy what they posses'[135].

Marriage was also the object of his attacks. He denounced the authority of the husband and the moral double standard that established different moral norms for women and men and punished female adultery with economic impoverishment and

---

[134] See Alexander, *History of Women, I*, pp. 319-20.

[135] Alexander, *History of Women, I*, p. 314.

social isolation. Law provided no relief for them[136]; women were legally regarded as minors, subsumed under the figure of the husband, and dispossessed of their properties, whose management belonged to the husband. He challenged the two spheres of action for women and men when he affirmed that

> in Britain we allow a woman to sway our sceptre, but by law and custom we debar her from every other government but that of the family, as if there were not a public employment between that of superintending the kingdom and the affairs of their own kitchen, which could be managed by the genius and capacity of women[137].

As this quotation underlines, Alexander's claims and tone reflected the eighteenth century ferment demanding women's rights and equality. Like its supporters, Alexander demanded the social and economical equality of women and denounced the contradictions of current discourses of femininity that emphasised the role of women while relegating them to a subordinate role. He emphasised men's responsibility for current unfair dispositions regarding women ('men have almost in all countries arrogated to themselves the power of making laws and of governing the women'[138]) and for the oppression of women in the past, 'they [women] have at all periods, and almost in every countries, been, by our sex constantly oppressed and adored'[139]. By emphasising the partiality of justice and civil arrangements such as propriety

---

136 See, principally, Alexander, *History of Women, II*, Appendix.

137 Alexander, *History of Women, II*, p. 505.

138 Alexander, *History of Women, II*, p. 339.

139 Alexander, *History of Women, I*, p. 150.

regulations, Alexander made it clear that the Scottish Enlightenment's identification of women with natural virtue regulated by sympathy, excluded them from the artificial rights of economic and legal equality. As a result, women depended on the generosity of their families and husbands and, excluded from civil law, were subjected to the male biased rule of opinion.

We have in Alexander many of the arguments that, almost a decade later, were used by Mary Wollstonecraft in her *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792). However, unlike Wollstonecraft, Alexander refused to articulate explicitly a demand for women's equality. In spite of his grasp of the injustice of women's current situation, Alexander opted for the justification of contemporary notions of femininity and gender relations. Resorting again to the discourse of sensibility, Alexander concluded that even if 'excluded from everything which can give them [women] consequence, they derive the greater part of their power which they enjoy, from their charms; and these, when joined to sensibility, often fully compensate, in this respect, for all the disadvantages they are laid by law and custom'[140].

The structure of the book itself reinforced Alexander's acceptance of women's condition. His criticism of the contemporary female condition was mainly placed in the appendix of the book and contradicted its general tone. For instance, his emphasis on economic independence was at odds with his belief that one of the principal features of the advancement of female condition consisted in relieving them from work and the

[140] Alexander, *History of Women, II*, p. 505.

establishment of a gendered division of labour. He identified female progress with the growing of the propertied interest for women described by Moran, when he associated the coming of agriculture with the establishment of property and monogamous marriage[141].

The prescriptive nature of the book was stressed by Alexander himself who affirmed that his aim was 'the improvement of their [women] understandings, and leading them by gentle arts to those paths of rectitude and decorum, from which some of them have deviated'[142]. Alexander's criticisms had a minor position in the book, which was principally devoted to support for the superiority of the current stage of female progress and of European women over the women of the past and the present. He emphasised that current improvement was especially beneficial for women who, moreover, would be the most damaged by its corruption. Thus, he enforced in his readers the duties and notions of femininity and morality upon which their advantageous situation rested, by warning them that, otherwise, they would run the risk of being reduced to the helpless situation of Eastern women.

---

[141] Moran, '"The Commerce of the Sexes"'.

[142] Alexander, *History of Women, I*, p. 463-64.

4

Human Nature: The Basis of the Conjectural Enquiry

The seventeenth century witnessed the transformation of western patterns of knowledge. Thus the period has been commonly associated with the scientific revolution and considered a turning point in the history of ideas. This notion has been masterly developed by Michel Foucault in *The Order of Things. An Archaeology of Human Sciences*, where both the seventeenth and eighteenth century are related to intellectual change and labelled as the 'classical period' in order to highlight its specificity as a distinctive phase in the evolution of discoursive practices. Foucault argued that Renaissance patterns of knowledge, based on identity and expressed in the form of hermeneutics and commentaries,

faded away in the seventeenth century; a process prompted by the works of Bacon, the discovery of the microscope and the voyages of discovery among other factors. As a result, new ways of looking at things, of identifying their knowledgeable marks and of expressing and constructing knowledge emerged, replacing analogy with analysis, the focus on similarities with a keenness for difference, erudition and divination with rationalism, and mere comparison with observation, order and classification. Three main disciplines illustrate this change: general grammar, natural history and the analysis of wealth, whose configuration exemplifies how a similar discoursive structure articulated the human sciences during the classical period[1].

The development of a science of man has been traditionally praised as one of the most remarkable achievements of the enlightened era. In the eighteenth century, while the scientific revolution slowed its pace and witnessed a period of consolidation and maturation of the triumphs accomplished in the past century, philosophers and theorists elevated man to the front stage of the intellectual scene. As it has been often emphasised, this move did not imply a revolt against the leading role and notorious success of natural philosophy. The shift of focus towards enquiries based on the human being was rather one of the many legacies of the scientific revolution. Eighteenth century writers sought to top up the achievements of the natural sciences with a comprehensive

[1] This is a brief account of a deep and thorough analysis which follows the transformation of discoursive practices into the nineteenth century. See Michel Foucault, *Las palabras y las cosas. Una arqueología de las ciencias humanas* (Madrid, 1978).

science of man. They took the baton handed by the natural philosophers and eagerly embraced the tenets of the Newtonian discourse seeking to apply its methods and objectives to the realm of human experience. Psychological evolution, societies, economic relations, institutions, laws and customs engaged the minds of the leading figures of the Enlightenment to a point that it has often been argued that the eighteenth century witnessed the birth of the human sciences and laid the foundation for the later development of sociology, anthropology and political economy[2].

Without denying the influence of the scientific achievements of the seventeenth century, it has also been remarked the importance of geographical discoveries in the emergence of the natural history of man. The development of the Enlightenment ran parallel to the opening of new areas of the world known to the Europeans, to an extent only matched in the fifteenth century, when Columbus reached America. The new discoveries in North America, the Pacific and Asia offered to the western intellectuals a vast amount of information which reflected the multiplicity of human physical features as well as social arrangements. Such diversity constituted a challenge to long-established assumptions about human nature and posed new questions which the enlightened sought to answer. It became thus the task of natural history to account for the variety of mankind and to bring order to the apparent chaos of human experience. Several scholars have

---

[2] See Foucault, *Las palabras y las cosas*, Christopher Fox, Roy Porter and Robert Wokler (eds.), *Inventing Human Science. Eighteenth Century Domains* (Berkeley & Los Angeles, 1995) and Ronald L. Meek, *Social Science and the Ignoble Savage* (Cambridge, 1976).

emphasised the relevance of the new era of discoveries to the blooming of enquiries on the human being and society, most significantly Anthony Pagden, who has linked the development of the natural history of man to the polemics which resulted from the European arrival to America[3].

The popularity of natural history among the enlightened intellectuals can be associated undoubtedly with many factors, even with the revival of the works of the authors of Antiquity. Authors such as Plato or Aristotle sought to place human beings within the great chain of being which connected world creatures through ascending degrees of perfectibility, a notion that was inherited by the medieval scholastic thought[4]. However, it is clear that scientific thought and new anthropological material provided the eighteenth century with new tools with which articulate old disputes and formulate new questions. The Newtonian revelation of the laws of nature inspired the methods of the new science of man while providing its ultimate aim: to search for a unified law behind man's mental, cultural and physical diversity[5]. Travellers' accounts supplied the European scholars with the facts necessary to fulfil their concern with observation and to base their claims to universal laws. The scientific revolution heightened the need to look for a new arrangement of the place of man within the realm

---

[3] See Anthony Pagden, *European Encounters with the New World: From Renaissance to Romanticism* (New Haven, 1993) and Meek, *Social Science and the Ignoble Savage.*

[4] For a study on this notion and its evolution, see Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being. A Study of the History of an Idea* (Cambridge, 1982).

[5] Roger Smith, 'The Language of Human Nature', in Christopher Fox, Roy Porter and Robert Wokler (eds.), *Inventing Human Science. Eighteenth Century Domains* (Berkeley & Los Angeles, 1995), pp. 88-111.

of nature while travelling literature forced western intellectuals to think about the diversity of races and cultures and to accommodate the European man within such diversity.

The genealogy of the enlightened natural history runs parallel, at least in England, to early modern attempts to establish a science of man on new grounds and to renew Ancient and Renaissance disciplines and scholarship. Through this process, human nature became a pivotal notion in eighteenth century discourses on the human being. However, the expression 'nature' or 'natural' did not convey an exact, definite meaning. It was rather defined by its ambiguity, being a key notion whose currency established a framework of discussion where different ideas were contested and examined.

It is possible, nevertheless, to distinguish two basic ways in which 'nature' was referred to. On the one hand, 'nature' conveyed the idea of essence, suggesting those qualities by which something could be singled out and differentiated. On the other hand, nature came to be increasingly used as 'a state of reality in itself' which could be matched up to culture, artificiality and society in order to articulate judgements of a moral, political and aesthetic quality. This usage enabled enlightened writers such as Rousseau to vindicate the 'state of nature' or the 'natural man'. This interpretation of nature was deeply indebted to the success of mathematical and experimental analysis, whose intellectual authority endorsed the use of nature as a notion up to which

human evolution could be measured and upon which knowledge of the human being could be based[6].

It is clear that the enlightened use of the expression 'human nature' did not constitute a complete breach with former discourses. Christian thought sustained a notion of human essence which was close to the first meaning we have examined. In addition, the second usage of nature carried undertones related to the biblical account of man's fall from paradise. A sense of continuity with the past was, moreover, enabled by the ambiguity of the expression itself, which allowed writers from different beliefs to understand it in the sense they thought more appropriate and to feel comfortable within the debate. Thus, due to the vagueness of the term, the discussion on human nature accommodated different interpretations, ranging from metaphysical and religious approaches, such as Leibniz's, to materialistic and commonsensical beliefs, such as the Scottish Enlightenment's. Instead of giving way to a myriad of discourses, differences of opinion fostered a discussion which was, besides, framed within a shared conceptual and linguistic framework[7].

In this way, the study of human nature attracted little opposition, allowing discourses to change slowly without provoking too great a sense of intellectual disruption. Yet, the enlightened enterprise of studying human nature as the main subject of its science of man involved a reorganization of former views about the nature of man in a way which clearly belongs to

---

[6] Smith, 'The Language of Human Nature', pp. 96-97.

[7] Smith, 'The Language of Human Nature'.

modernity. In the eighteenth century the expression human nature became a 'self-evident basis on which to found moralistic arguments – whether of a Christian or a secular variety'[8]. It was an a priori category, which provided the ground for the study of human physical and social operations and to understand their diversity.

Following the path of the scientific analysts, enlightened thinkers modelled their notions of human nature on the physical nature revealed by Newtonian physics. Enlightened authors, such as Hume, believed that this notion had a content that could be derived from observation of human life and explained by laws of universal quality. Facts provided the observational material upon which they sought to elaborate universal laws applicable to all the realms of human experience.

Like their scientific counterparts, eighteenth century theorists erased God from their accounts. The divinity remained the ultimate reference, as the maker of the world and final validation of moral arguments. However, once stated this meagre role, God's intervention did not provide the gist of the explanation anymore. Having set nature into motion, the human and natural world worked according to their own laws, for whose analysis little reference to God was necessary. Instead of being the main agent, God seemed to be conceived as the major observer of the workings of its creation. Nevertheless, putting aside the medieval God-centred model of the universe and history did not imply a complete rejection of the divinity or atheism, as proved by the

[8] Smith, 'The Language of Human Nature', p. 100.

work of the Scottish philosophers, many of whom were devoted members of the Church of Scotland. It was rather believed that, as in natural philosophy, a separation between the realms of Providence and human history was necessary in order to delimitate a secular sphere in which scientific research about mankind could be properly done. The study of God's qualities and operations was not neglected but left for the theologians to explore[9].

A more materialistic frame of thought went together with what has been called a 'spiritualization of humanity'. The medieval soul/body dualism was redefined in new terms which still maintained man's uniqueness among the creatures of the creation. Most eighteenth century writers believed in dualism and divided man into external matter – body – and soul, the immaterial element which singled out humanity from the natural kingdom. However, there was a shift of focus from the metaphysical enquiry about the soul towards the realm of morality. In addition, eighteenth century theorists preferred to concentrate on reason, the other proof of man's superiority and joint gift from God to humanity. Reason assumed the role which soul had in the medieval tradition. Taking humanity's immortality of the soul as a matter of course, the enlightened concentrated on explaining human rationality and its function in the realm of morality.

---

[9] Robert Wokler, 'Anthropology and Conjectural History in the Enlightenment', in Christopher Fox, Roy Porter and Robert Wokler (eds.), *Inventing Human Science. Eighteenth Century Domains* (Berkeley & Los Angeles, 1995), pp. 31-52, pp. 32-33 and David Carrithers, 'The Enlightenment Science of Society', in Christopher Fox, Roy Porter and Robert Wokler (eds.), *Inventing Human Science. Eighteenth Century Domains* (Berkeley & Los Angeles, 1995), pp. 232-270, pp. 236-8.

Besides, eighteenth century theorists sought to explain human singularity on account of man's reasoning powers. Due to reason and unlike other animals, the human being had changed and improved its nature and constructed a realm of morality so that its actions had an ethical value. Hence the interest on the operations of the human mind, such as Locke's, and the dismissal of man's fundamental likeness with apes, such as Buffon's, in a time when physical similarities with the primates were brought to light thanks to the discovery of new specimens[10].

Man came to be understood as the artificer of his own nature and the author of his world. Human nature was shaped according to man's designs. It could not be simply explained as a mere resemblance to the creator; it was rather the result of man's workings. Moreover, the history of civilisation was also conceptualised as the result of human agency and not as the fulfilment of a divine plan or intervention. As Robert Wokler remarked, 'in a disanctified world, our nature came increasingly to be understood as manufactured by mankind itself, with the history of civilisation standing to human nature as the creation stands to God'[11].

For the natural historian of man, history constituted the laboratory of his science of humankind. History provided the facts which allowed the theorists to disentangle human nature and delve into its characteristics, for it showed the passage of humanity from barbarism to civilisation or, as it has been termed by Robert

[10] See Carrithers, 'Enlightenment Science of Society' and Wokler, 'Anthropology and Conjectural History'.

[11] Wokler, 'Anthropology and Conjectural History'.

Wokler, from the 'physical man' to the 'moral man'. History illustrated how human nature, in its sense of essence and potentiality, had developed to the fulfilment of its possibilities by polishing the passions and refining its faculties. The enlightened sought to trace this evolution leaving aside any metaphysical pattern of explanation. Humankind's path from the domination of the passions to the rule of reason should be accounted for by relying on human factors; that is, by examining how human nature had been transformed as a result of the interaction both with its fellow beings and with the physical environment[12].

A more secularist point of view was not the only legacy inherited from the scientific revolution. Along with its intellectual framework, the eighteenth century science of man adopted many of its methodological tenets. Enlightened writers revolted against the purely deductive approach of Cartesian and Hobbesian thought and transplanted natural philosophy's emphasis on experimentation and observation to the study of the human being and his workings. As Hume wrote in his *Treatise of Human Nature*, 'observation and experience form the basis for moral, political and physical subjects'[13].

Eighteenth century scholars were convinced that the study of mankind was little different from the study of objects in nature and that observing individuals in society required an approach no different from that which Newton had employed in analysing nature. Their ultimate aim was to discover in human behaviour the

12 Wokler, 'Anthropology and Conjectural History'.

13 Quoted in Carrithers, 'Enlightenment Science of Society', p. 239.

same degree of order and lawfulness which had been revealed in the physical world, in order that human actions could be explained by systematic and holistic causes. Accordingly, they did not apply themselves to the particular explanation of isolated problems, whose account could not provide an explanatory pattern of human behaviour or unravel the mysteries of human nature. They were concerned with the historical long-term and with structural processes. Due to their belief in the basic similarity of human nature throughout time and space, enlightened scholars concentrated on the study of man in society, looking for raw material for their 'experiments' both in historical records and in travellers' accounts. As Hume argued, 'mankind are so much the same in all times and places that history informs us of nothing new or strange in this particular. Its chief use is only to discover the constant and universal principles of human nature'[14].

The term 'experiment' was recognised as one not strictly applicable to this science of man. However, the enlightened stuck to this notion as a way of pointing out that they too could use the methods of deduction and induction to establish their theories. While the sameness of human nature provided the ground for inductive conclusions about man, the recollection of facts from the past and from contemporary societies, enabled them to deduce hypothesis about the human being. As Hume remarked, 'wars, intrigues, factions and revolutions [are] so many collections of experiments by which the politician or moral philosopher fixes the

---

[14] Quoted in Andrew S. Skinner, 'Natural History in the Age of Adam Smith', *Political Studies*, 15, (1967), p. 35.

principles of his science, in the same manner as the physician or natural philosopher becomes acquainted with the nature of plants, minerals and other external objects'[15].

Having briefly introduced the enlightened concern with human nature and the influential role played by the progress of natural philosophy in the eighteenth century quest for a science of man, we will concentrate now on how both developments helped to shape Scottish conjectural history and ultimately Alexander's *History of Women*. First, we will turn to the origins and sources of conjectural history, considered as the Scottish Enlightenment's project of a natural history of man. Secondly, we will examine the ways in which scientific approaches and methods were translated into the conjectural enquiry. Finally, we will look at Alexander's *History of Women* in detail, in order to show how, due to the author's methods and basic assumptions, the book can be considered an attempt to write a 'natural history of women'[16].

ORIGIN AND SOURCES OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY SCOTTISH SCIENCE OF MAN

The scientific revolution and its success should certainly be considered an important inspiration to the work for the Scottish enlightened community. Its intellectual breakthroughs and the practical nature of its achievements attracted the interest of the

[15] Quoted in Carrithers, 'Enlightenment Science of Society', p. 241.

[16] Sylvana Tomaselli, 'Reflections on the History of the Science of Woman', *History of Science*, 29, (1991), pp. 185-205.

Scottish literati, keen as they were on uniting academic pursuits with social advancement and reform. However, other influences helped to shape the conjectural project, for the scientific principles of rationality, objectivity and empiricism had to be translated to the realm of human nature. The works of previous authors, such as Bacon, Hobbes and Locke already contained appeals to a holistic science of man. The taxonomical studies of Buffon and Linnaeus helped to relate the analysis of the natural world to the enquiry into the human being. Travel literature provided an apparently endless array of factual material to work with. And above all, there was a favourable ferment already present in the Scottish cultivated society: scientific literature and developments were followed and encouraged while medicine assumed a significant role due to the success and prestige of this discipline at the Scottish universities.

Early Modern Forerunners of Natural History: Bacon, Hobbes and Locke

Its is difficult to trace the genealogy of the expression 'human nature' since it did not gain wide currency until the eighteenth century when Hume identified human nature as the subject of the 'science of man'. Thus, it is not clear whether enlightened references to human nature were indebted to the adoption of the method and vocabulary of natural philosophy or whether it had multiple roots. The eighteenth century concern about man can be traced as far as the philosophy of Roger Bacon, who advocated the classification and description of human character types as part of what he called 'the culture of the mind' and called for histories of

the human senses, the passions and the faculties of the mind. Scottish scholars were well aware of Bacon's defence of an empiric and comparative method which dealt with body and mind and their interconnections[17].

Following Bacon, Hobbes's moral philosophy was indebted to mathematics and natural philosophy, as proved by his emphasis on materialism and empiricism. Like Bacon, Hobbes argued for a science of man which, divided into natural history and civil history, was concerned with the workings of human nature such as the senses, the passions and the speech. This science of man, besides, should not address the experiences of particular individuals but rather deal with the whole of mankind. This idea would become one of the basic tenets of the enlightened enquiry about man[18].

The following link between the early modern intellectual tradition and the enlightened science of man can be found in Locke's philosophy, whose theories on education and politics inspired many of the writers of the Scottish Enlightenment. Like Hobbes, Locke thought that there was a human nature which could be identified and explored. He showed great interest in tracing the progressive evolution of the passions and faculties of mind, and emphasised the importance of using a comparative method in moral philosophy. Thus, in order to determine human mental development, he contrasted human beings with animals.

---

17 Smith, 'The Language of Human Nature', p. 94, Paul Wood, 'The Natural History of Man in the Scottish Enlightenment', *History of Science*, 27, (1989), pp. 89-123 and Paul Wood, 'The Science of Man', in N. Jardine, J. A. Secord and E. C. Spary (eds.), *Cultures of Natural History* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 197-210, pp. 197-98.

18 Smith, 'The Language of Human Nature'.

Rejecting the Cartesian view that beasts were mere machines, Locke championed systematic comparisons between evidence drawn from the animal kingdom and the operations of the human mind.

Locke advocated a history of the human mind by using evidence from past societies and from travellers' accounts. In so doing, he opened new perspectives on the relevance of history, anthropology and the comparative study of languages to a science of man. Finally, Locke bridged the gulf between moral philosophy and the nascent Newtonian natural philosophy, for he integrated the latter's conceptualisation of nature in his theory of knowledge, as the external world to which human senses responded[19].

Linnaeus and Buffon: Man and the Animal Kingdom

Eighteenth century progress in scientific disciplines such as taxonomy and anatomy were received with interest by the enlightened scholars concerned with the study of the human being and his social formations. These scientific branches inserted man straightforwardly within the kingdom of nature, and compared man's external features with animal physical appearance, in order to establish an organization of world creatures. In addition, these disciplines singled out significant varieties within humankind, seeking to arrange them in an intelligible order, according to differences of complexion and behaviour.

---

[19] See Wood, 'Natural History of Man', Wood, 'The Science of Man', pp. 203-03 and Smith, 'The Language of Human Nature', pp. 94-95.

Renaissance anatomists broke with the classical tradition which considered the human being analogous to animals in its physical shape. Aristotle had placed man firmly in the category of *Quadrupeds*, alongside other animals while Galen had based his knowledge of the human body on comparisons with other animals. In the early modern period, anatomists such as Andreas Vesalius rejected that such comparisons could provide a valid ground for learning and focused, instead, on the dissection of the human body, thus elevating the human being to the centre of the scientific enquiry and neglecting any effort to draw human beings into a more generalised order of nature. In addition, early modern scholars devoted to the classification of the different elements of nature generally excluded human beings from their systematic arrangements. The disconnection of man from natural processes was emphasised by Descartes, who by setting a rigid divide between the *res extensa* and the *res cogitans* further detached the human being from nature. By asserting the empire of reason in his conceptualisation of man, Cartesian philosophy left only his nutshell, the body, as part of nature's matter and laws[20].

However, eighteenth century scholars redressed this trend. Seeking to establish a comprehensive classification of the elements of nature, authors such as Linnaeus and Buffon placed human beings as a taxonomic group alongside the rest of the organic

[20] See Glenn Harcourt, 'Andreas Vesalius and the Anatomy of Antique Sculpture', *Representations*, 0, (1987), pp. 28-61, Phillip Sloan, 'The Gaze of Natural History', in Christopher Fox, Roy Porter and Robert Wokler (eds.), *Inventing Human Science. Eighteenth Century Domains* (Berkeley & Los Angeles, 1995), pp. 112-151, Londa Schiebinger, 'Why Mammals Are Called Mammals. Gender Politics in Eighteenth Century Natural History', *American Historical Review*, 98, (1993), pp. 382-411, and Wood, 'The Science of Man'.

nature. In this period, geographical discoveries and travellers' accounts filled the scholars' cabinets with expanding information on the range and diversity of humankind. The European exploration of the Pacific and America led to a better knowledge of the zoological, botanic and mineral diversity of the world as well as of human differences across the globe. Together with samples of plants and animals, new species of monkeys and baboons reached Europe. Due to the increasing amount of knowledge collected about the human species, the world came to be conceptualised as a 'human space', defined as much by a map of tribes and different human groups as it was by geographical coordinates. Consequently, it became urgent not only to establish the position of mankind within the animal kingdom but also to determine the place of the European man among such human varieties[21].

This task was first undertaken by Linnaeus in his *Systema naturae sive regna tria naturae* which, published in 1735, underwent constant revisions until 1766. The system of classification envisaged by Linnaeus in this work had a long-lasting resonance and has been considered the starting point of modern zoological nomenclature. He divided nature in three basic kingdoms, animal, botanical and mineral, the former of which was further divided into six classes. Man was classified within the mammals as *anthropomorpha* together with the primates; although, because of his rationality, he was given a genus of its own, *homo*. The genus *homo* was further divided into different varieties including the *homo*

[21] See Sloan, 'The Gaze of Natural History' and Wood, 'The Science of Man'.

sapiens albus, the *homo sapiens americanus rubescens*, the *homo sapiens asiaticus fuscus* and the *homo sapiens africanus niger*, each variety fitting each of the four continents. Although in the edition of 1744 all species comprised within the genus *homo* shared the label *sapiens*, in later editions Linnaeus included other types clearly lacking full rationality such as the *homo troglodytes* and the *homo sylvestris*, which were introduced in order to fit the far-fetched tales from explorers which had identified in the depths of Asia wild men of the forests and savages dwelling in caves[22].

Linnaeus was severely criticised in his time for blurring the basic distinction between animals and human beings. As demonstrated by his insertion of the *homo troglodytes*, Linnaeus focused primarily on morphology and applied the same criteria of classification both to man and the rest of creatures of the animal kingdom, thus highlighting the basic 'animality' of the human being. In spite of his critiques, his decision to locate man among animals was not entirely new; it was framed within the traditional notion of the 'great chain of being'. In addition, Linnaeus stated clearly that his task was limited to the exploration of the physical varieties of nature and that, in spite of man's bodily likeness to animal creatures, man's uniqueness was clearly grounded on his rational faculties which were emphasised by his election of taxonomical terms. Yet for Linnaeus reason was subjected to the same level of gradation typical of the other external marks upon which he built his taxonomic arrangement. Reason was a quality that could thus be possessed in different levels of perfection and

[22] Sloan, 'The Gaze of Natural History'.

could be traced upwards and downwards in its perfectibility or deficiency. Consequently, it was possible to establish a clear line of rational decline from the *homo sapiens europeus* downwards within the human species[23].

Linnaean physical anthropology was not the only model available. In 1749 Buffon published his *Histoire naturelle, générale et particulière*, which confronted Linnaeus's paradigm. Buffon contested Linnaeus's notion of species by rejecting the latter's belief on abstract types, according to which there were certain essential characters possessed by each species which could thus be singled out and differentiated from the others. Buffon, by contrast, founded his order of nature on physical facts which, repeated a sufficient number of times, would provide the ground to identify different individuals as belonging to the same species, and to trace their natural history. A species was defined by the material connections between its members; they should share similar features and defining properties. Besides, individuals comprised under the same Buffonian type should be able to interbreed with fertility[24].

Buffon's notion of species proved deeply influential for the enlightened enquiries on the nature of man. Since he looked at the repetition of features for the establishment of a particular type, the individual itself was irrelevant in his study of nature. It was the relation between the individuals and the repetition of a pattern across time and space which mattered. As Buffon argued,

[23] Sloan, 'The Gaze of Natural History'.

[24] Sloan, 'The Gaze of Natural History', Wood, 'Natural History of Man' and Wood, 'The Science of Man'.

'however marvellous [the individual] appears to us, it is not in the individual that we find the greatest marvel. It is in the succession, in the renewal and in the duration of species that Nature appears almost inconceivable'[25]. He sought to characterise organisms by a complex interrelation of behavioural, biological, geographical and relational properties. His study of man was based on the customs which were natural to him, according to different climates and geographical settings. Accordingly, Buffon introduced in his account both a naturalisation and a historisation of the human species. As a result, a multidimensional pattern for the study of man emerged, in which temporal and spatial factors should be considered[26].

Enlightened writers seeking to establish a science of the human being were deeply influenced by other aspects of Buffon's taxonomy. Although Buffon regarded man as analogous to animals and located him among them in his order of nature, his project was also characterised by its anthropocentrism. The structure of Buffon's book, for instance, was clearly focused on human experience. Men provided the starting point of the work which then unfolded the diversity of the animal world arranged according to its relation with humans. Domestic animals, accordingly, followed man in Buffon's account. In addition, Buffon maintained the metaphysical difference between animals and humans which

[25] Quoted in Sloan, 'The Gaze of Natural History', p. 131.

[26] Sloan, 'The Gaze of Natural History'.

was not blurred, as in Linnaeus case, by the introduction of simian data[27].

Being a monogenist, Buffon believed that humankind had originated in a single act of creation. Human diversity could not be accounted for by establishing an essential difference between different groups of men, hence his emphasis on geographical and historical factors which would provide the correct explanation for the variety of humankind. However, Buffon's monogenetic beliefs did not prevent him from establishing a gradation of the races of humankind. Though belonging to the same species, men could yet be divided into families and genres. Due to successive migrations and as a response to the vicissitudes of climate, geography and availability of food, man had evolved from its original type to the racial diversity witnessed by current travellers. Nevertheless, this evolution could assume two radical directions. Some human groups, under the action of temperate climates had been able to improve and stand out in the development of arts and sciences. For others, by contrast, adaptability meant degeneration, a decline and degradation of the original and ancestral form perpetuated by reproduction. No human type could exemplify better the latter process than the American Indians. Buffon's collection of data suggested that American mammals were often smaller, less robust and less fertile than their European analogues, which he attributed to a degeneration of the original Old World type. Similarly, the American Indian

[27] Sloan, 'The Gaze of Natural History'.

> is weak and small in the organs of generation; he has neither beard, nor attraction for the female... he is also less sensitive and more fearful... he has neither vivacity, nor activity in his soul... he will rest stupidly in repose on his haunches or sleep for the entire day[28].

The Americans were, therefore, a degenerated race, defeated by the corrosive side of the forces of nature. Eventually and in spite of the hints of polygenism that opposed Linnaeus account to Buffon's, both authors reached similar conclusions. Even if all humankind shared the same nature, it was clear that a scale of perfection could be established among its varieties and that the 'great chain of being' that linked human beings with their animal inferiors could be translated to the arrangement of the human species itself.

Environmentalism and Eighteenth Century Medicine

Eighteenth century medicine also proved to be highly influential in the development of a natural history of man and society. Current historiographical research offers different interpretations regarding the advancement of medicine during this period. Some authors tend to view eighteenth century medicine as a scientific backwater, unable to attain the same level of prestige and innovation as other sciences, such as chemistry or physics. They thus have argued for the absence of a 'medical revolution' until the nineteenth century. Medicine, indeed, offered eighteenth century practitioners a scant degree of stability or respect. There were striking differences between those physicians striving for a

[28] Quoted in Sloan, 'The Gaze of Natural History', p. 136.

living in countryside areas and those operating in the cities and fast-growing towns. The rural doctors, more often than not, had to contend with more traditional forms of medicine, dominated by custom and women, and had therefore to compete hard for patients and for the deference which, as university trained and aspiring middle class professionals, they sought. In the urban areas, physicians relied on a more secure clientele among the well-to-do growing middle classes and the aristocracy. Even so, they depended on the status of their clients to prosper and assert their claims to professionalism. Besides, the threat of being associated with the female sphere persisted, as proved by the heated debates regarding man-midwifery during the eighteenth century. Overall, medicine was a profession regularly associated with quackery, servility to the patient's whimsicalities and unmerited profits rather than with scientific and stable knowledge. Even at its best, it offered its practitioners an unstable identity which had to be constantly upheld. However, as Ludmilla Jordanova has pointed out, the lack of a fixed and respected status was something which physicians shared with scientific practitioners of any kind until well into the nineteenth century[29].

---

[29] See Roy Porter, 'Medical Science and Human Science in the Enlightenment', in Christopher Fox, Roy Porter and Robert Wokler (eds.), *Inventing Human Science. Eighteenth Century Domains* (Berkeley & Los Angeles, 1995), pp. 53-87 and Ludmilla Jordanova, *Nature Displayed. Gender, Science and Medicine, 1760-1820* (London & New York, 1999). On eighteenth century debates regarding male midwifery, see Ludmilla Jordanova, *Sexual Visions. Images of Gender in Science and Medicine between the Eighteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Madison, Wisconsin, 1989), Jordanova, *Nature Displayed*, Randolph Trumbach, *The Rise of the Egalitarian Family* (New York, 1978) and Londa Schiebinger, *The Mind Has No Sex? Women in the Origins of Modern Science* (Cambridge, Mass., 1989).

Other authors, such as Peter Gay, have emphasised the transformations which medicine underwent during the eighteenth century. These changes turned the discipline into a philosophical science by lessening the weight of tradition and metaphysics, and by opening new lines of work related to experimentation, anatomy and clinical study. According to this view, it is adequate to talk about a 'medical revolution' in this period; a revolution which besides shared many characteristics with the progress of the Enlightenment and, in turn, enhanced the enlightened sense of confidence[30].

Medicine assumed eagerly the tenets of the Newtonian discourse. The realm of the marvellous and the mysterious was reduced to intelligibility through the collection of facts and their arrangement in tables, formulae, equations and ratios, which additionally allowed the formulation of general trends. At the same time, the emphasis on natural causes and general laws resulted on a more secular study of the body and its illnesses which was coupled with a belief on the capacity of medicine to predict and thus prevent sickness. The mathematical thrust was also felt in the effort to record biomedical regularities. The compilation of vital statistics, such as the elaboration of life tables, the calculation of life expectancies and the investigation of periodicities in epidemic outbreaks, was an important trend within eighteenth century medicine which in addition heightened the importance of medicine in the management of the social order and national affairs. Classification initiatives, similar as those undertaken by the

[30] Porter, 'Medical Science and Human Science'.

students of the natural world, flourished during the period. Organised catalogues of diseases were established, in which illnesses were conceptualised as objective and quantifiable entities which could thus be identifiable and treated with success. This move towards classification had clear pedagogic ends, since it facilitated the training of students which flooded many universities, as in the Scottish case. Universities were keen to adopt the latest scientific trends and to include in their curricula subjects on anatomy and dissection[31].

Due to their unstable status, physicians resorted to the celebration of their skills using images and discourses akin to those employed by the enlightened philosophers. The task of medicine was dramatised as the struggle of reason against superstition, of open-mindedness against dogmatism and of experience against deferential reliance on authority. The evolution of medicine was often depicted as a path running from obscurity towards scientific prowess and accuracy in much the same way as the natural historian's portray of human progress from savagery towards civilisation. Similarly, the ultimate aim of medicine was described as part of the general human quest for progress and happiness by representing 'the improvement of health as essential to human emancipation – from fear, from want, from suffering'[32].

---

31 Porter, 'Medical Science and Human Science'. On the evolution of the teaching of medicine at the Scottish universities, see Anand C. Chitnis, *The Scottish Enlightenment: A Social History* (Totowa, New Jersey, 1976) and Christopher Lawrence, 'The Nervous System and Society in the Scottish Enlightenment', in Barry Barnes and Steven Shapin (eds.), *Natural Order. Historical Studies of Scientific Culture* (Beverly Hills & London, 1979), pp. 19-40.

32 Porter, 'Medical Science and Human Science', p. 56.

The enlightened, in turn, used the image of the physician to describe their task. The metaphor of the enlightened philosopher portrayed as a doctor diagnosing the ills of society became increasingly common as the century went by. This kind of images bears witness to the close relationship which existed between the realms of the natural history of society and medicine. Many enlightened writers, like William Alexander, were physicians or had a solid background in anatomy and physiology which they used to understand racial and sexual difference. Convinced that a rigorous study of man should comprise not only his moral side but also his physicality, eighteenth century theorists turned to medicine for expert advice on human nature. Natural historians resorted to medical tracts to comprehend the workings, both of body and mind, of the human being and reflected in their writings the main trends of medical thinking during the eighteenth century: mechanicism and environmentalism.

Following the stark division between body and mind established by Cartesian philosophy, in the first part of the eighteenth century the human body came to be understood as a self-contained mechanism composed of a series of parts which, in health, worked harmoniously as a well-geared clock. However, as Descartes's dualism fell out of fashion within the field of natural history, mechanicism was replaced by an environmentalist approach which proved to be deeply influential for the natural historians of man. Environmentalist medicine focused on the nervous system and structured the human being as a continuum of body and mind in which psychological traits were as relevant as corporal factors in order to pursue health. Physical afflictions

could be rooted in disorderly mental states just as physical causes could endanger psychological well-being. Eighteenth century concerns about melancholy offer a clear example of the environmentalist point of view. Melancholy was deemed a psychological condition which endangered the normal functions of the individual, provoking languor and feebleness of body. At the same time, melancholy, although primarily rooted in the psyche, was thought to be provoked by physical causes such as lack of exercise[33].

The main attractive of environmental medicine for the scholar devoted to the study of society was its capacity to integrate the social within the analysis of health. The delicate equilibrium between body and mind was particularly sensitive to the effects of its environment, an ill-defined concept which comprised a cluster of variables that acted upon the organism and determined the mental and physiological character of the individual. Some of these variables, such as climate, were immutable and natural whilst others such as diet, housing, work or family life, belonged to the realm of society and culture. Life-style, habit and custom were thought to be powerful factors affecting sickness and health and thus, a firmly regulated bodily economy was deemed essential to well-being[34].

The environmental approach could be used by medical practitioners as a source of respect, by claiming a leading role as

---

[33] See Jordanova, *Sexual Visions* and Porter, 'Medical Science and Human Science'.

[34] See Jordanova, *Sexual Visions* and Porter, 'Medical Science and Human Science'.

monitors in this interplay of medicine, sickness and society. By contrast, when environmentalism was blended with stoicism, the role of the physician was minimised and replaced by an individual, self-imposed management of the self. However, environmentalism certainly established bridges between medicine and the study of society by placing disease and pathology within history and the dynamics of culture.

Being a physician, Alexander used the principles of environmentalism in his *History of Women*, particularly to account for the marked gender differences observed in polished countries. Having remarked that the sexes possessed a different although complementary nature, Alexander argued that the distinction between the sexes was particularly deep in current European societies due to the flaws of women's education and their mode of living. Women had become unnaturally weak and delicate in commercial societies 'but these qualities are only the result of art, otherwise they would uniformly mark the sex, however circumstanced; but as this is not the case, we may attribute them to a sedentary life, a low abstemious diet, and exclusion from the fresh air'. These factors were 'productive of that laxity of the female fibres and sensibility of nerves' which characterised especially women of the upper levels of society whose education and occupations strengthened the influence of these factors. Therefore, Alexander was apt to conclude that nature, in forming the bodies and minds of both sexes, 'has been nearly alike liberal to each; and that any apparent difference on the exertions of the

strength of the one, or the reasoning of the other, are much more the work of art than of nature'[35].

Science and Improvement: The Institutionalisation of Natural History in Scotland

Natural history had reached by the eighteenth century widespread popularity among Scottish intellectual circles. The Scots were avid readers of Buffon's and other natural historical texts and shared the current fascination with botany, zoology and mineralogy. At the same time, the main trends of European natural history were firmly grounded within Scottish polite and cultured life; they were discussed in the fast-growing intellectual societies and associations, and institutionalised at the Scottish universities as a substantial part of the curriculum. As the *Critical Review* remarked in 1763, 'natural history is now, by a kind of national establishment, become the favourite study of the times'[36].

The introduction of natural history and modern science in Scottish intellectual circles dates back to the seventeenth century. From the 1680s to the 1710s, a remarkable part of the Scottish intelligentsia coupled their improving and antiquarian interests with natural historical pursuits. Among this group, the work of Sir Robert Sibbald and Dr Archibald Pitcairne should be noted. The former contributed to institutionalise in Scotland the critical methods and the empirical secular outlook which were typical of

---

[35] William Alexander, (1782 ed.) *The History of Women. From the Earliest Antiquity to the Present Time* (Bristol, 1995), Vol. 2, pp. 57-58.

[36] Quoted in Wood, 'Natural History of Man', p. 89.

the Enlightenment. Particularly, he played a leading role in the schemes for the establishment of a Scottish national academy, aimed at channelling scientific, antiquarian and improving concerns and modelled upon the example of the Royal Society of London and its French and Italian counterparts. Dr. Archibald Pitcairne, on his part, was a keen devotee of the philosophy of Newton, with whom he exchanged correspondence, and toiled to introduce modern science in the Scottish universities[37].

The institutionalisation of natural knowledge in Scotland was well under way by the 1680s. In spite of the work of individuals such as those mentioned above, the diffusion of the latest scientific achievements within Scotland was, on the whole, part of a collective endeavour. The quest for scientifism was part of the Scottish response to self-perceptions of backwardness and imbued, at the same time, with a strong pride in being Scottish. The intellectual community, supported by the entrepreneurial classes and landed gentry, was determined to catch up with the modern standards of life and knowledge found elsewhere, of which scientific progress was considered to be an important part. Science was seen as a powerful means of renovating Scottish economy and thought to provide a better understanding of Scottish resources and how they might be used for the common good. At the same time, the optimism for the future associated with science endowed

[37] Roger L. Emerson, 'Science and the Origins and Concerns of the Scottish Enlightenment', *History of Science*, 26, (1988), pp. 333-365, pp. 338-40.

these improving initiatives with a sense of confidence in the possibility of change[38].

Social and intellectual factors accounted for the early transmission of scientific principles in Scotland; they were not only the cutting edge of European intellectual progress but also, most importantly, they addressed current Scottish feelings and needs, thus appealing to wide sections of the Scottish society. As a consequence, different institutions and groups played a role in the institutionalisation of science at the Scottish universities and in its diffusion within the intellectual community. Medical and legal associations stressed the utility of scientific pursuits and demanded adequate equipment for the universities. Intellectual clubs promoted the fascination with the achievements of natural philosophy, a fascination that also permeated the Scottish Parliament, the universities and the political elite. Most importantly, at the top echelons of the political elite, among the political managers who dominated Scottish affairs, were individuals concerned and even personally involved with science. James Drummond, Sir James Ogilvie and John Erskine, in the first part

---

[38] See Emerson, 'Science and the Origins of the Scottish Enlightenment', p. 346-7. On the mentality of improvement in seventeenth and eighteenth century Scotland, see Bernard Bailyn and Philip D. Morgan (eds.), *Strangers within the Realm. Cultural Margins of the First British Empire* (Chapel Hill & London, 1991), Chitnis, *Scottish Enlightenment*, Colin Kidd, 'North Britishness and the Nature of Eighteenth Century British Patriotisms', *The Historical Journal*, 39, (1996), pp. 361-382, N. T. Phillipson, 'Towards a Definition of the Scottish Enlightenment', in David Williams Paul Fritz (ed.), *City and Society in the Eighteenth Century* (Toronto, 1973), pp. 125-147, N. T. Phillipson, 'Scottish Public Opinion and the Union in the Age of the Association', in N. T. Phillipson and Rosalind Mitchison (eds.), *Scotland in the Age of Improvement* (Edinburgh, 1970) and Richard L. Sher, *Church and University in the Scottish Enlightenment* (Edinburgh, 1985) among others.

of the eighteenth century, promoted appointments of mathematicians and natural philosophers at the Scottish universities. The Duke of Argyll, later on, was thoroughly acquainted with mechanics, technology and natural history while the Earl of Bute was a fine botanist himself and a powerful patron in the Scottish universities[39].

The pull towards science of the late seventeenth century was carried forward during the eighteenth century. As a result, by the 1710s, the new science had been institutionalised in all of the Scottish colleges. Natural and moral philosophy were taught on the same footing as traditional subjects such as logic and metaphysics. By the 1730s, Bacon was revered and widely read at the Scottish universities and his works constituted an important part of the curriculum. Subjects on natural philosophy and mathematics were created, following the most recent European trends and the principles of Newtonian philosophy; lectures on botany and anatomy were introduced while botanical gardens and anatomy theatres were built in order to provide the experimental expertise which should accompany theoretical lessons. Medicine was particularly affected by such renovation due to the huge success of the Scottish medical schools within Britain and beyond. This success encouraged the creation of chairs of medicine and

[39] See Emerson, 'Science and the Origins of the Scottish Enlightenment', p. 354-56 and Chitnis, *Scottish Enlightenment*.

deepened the impact made upon the Scots by both natural history and Newtonian philosophy[40].

Yet, the introduction of science in Scotland would not be complete without the collaboration of the clubs and associations which, at a more informal level, disseminated the passion for science, established networks through which scientific knowledge circulated, and encouraged personal contacts between scientific practitioners and social and moral philosophers. Scientific clubs dated from the seventeenth century – there were five of this kind in Edinburgh between 1684 and 1712 – but increased greatly in number and associates during the eighteenth century. Surgical and medical clubs led this trend which was rapidly followed from the 1720s onwards by associations devoted to the study of agriculture, botany, chemistry and natural philosophy. The intellectual societies formed in Scotland after the European associationist ferment tended to incorporate scientific issues as a subject of discussion while societies devoted to the improvement of the country, such as the Society for the Improvement in the Knowledge of Agriculture, considered the practical application of scientific theories as one of their main aims. Men such as David Hume, Adam Smith, Adam Ferguson, Lord Kames or John Millar were interested in and familiar with science while others, such as John Gregory and Alexander himself, were scientific practitioners themselves. All of them belonged to clubs in which natural history, natural philosophy and mathematics were discussed. They regarded

---

[40] See Emerson, 'Science and the Origins of the Scottish Enlightenment', Chitnis, *Scottish Enlightenment*, Wood, 'Natural History of Man' and Wood, 'The Science of Man'.

scientific practitioners as fellow literati and saw them as colleagues[41].

By the time when the most remarkable thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment were developing their intellectual careers, science and natural history had permeated all levels of Scottish intellectual life. Scientific knowledge was accessible and, moreover, highly respected, due both to the peculiarities of the Scottish society and to the cosmopolitan pull of the Scottish Enlightenment. Although truly concerned with the progress and welfare of their native land, Scottish philosophers saw themselves as part of the European intellectual community whose basic ideas and attitudes they shared and whose works and evolution they eagerly followed and commented.

Travel Literature

Travel literature was an important source of information and inspiration for those scholars engaged on the task of unravelling the natural history of man. Although during the seventeenth century English commercial and colonial ventures had already expanded the knowledge regarding non-European peoples and stimulated the interest of the public in this type of materials, it was in the eighteenth century when publications on distant regions reached widespread popularity and flood-tide proportions. The expansion of the print encouraged the popularity of travel books, which profited from the different venues which during the eighteenth century allowed easier access to printed materials.

[41] See Emerson, 'Science and the Origins of the Scottish Enlightenment'.

Travellers' accounts figured prominently in the expanding world of journals and magazines, were discussed in debating societies and literary clubs, and formed a significant part of the libraries, both private and public, whose numbers increased during the period[42].

Whether first hand or edited by writers in the metropolis, travel literature could be found in different shapes, levels of accuracy and prices. There was certainly a vibrant and varied market for these accounts, and accordingly readers of different economic positions and intellectual backgrounds were catered for. Large folio-size collections reviewed inherited knowledge while also including new materials from different sources. The Churchill and the Harris collections, for instance, were published in the first decade of the century, reaching immediate popularity. As a consequence, they were followed by similar collections and frequently revised and reedited throughout the century.

Anthologies of travel accounts were pruned and published in more affordable and comprehensive one-volume syntheses. Some of these compilations were clearly targeted for the learned public and included sections which ranged from travellers' reports to the findings of scholars working on Arabic manuscripts and Jesuit writings on Chinese society. Many others, such as single-volume gazetteers, were by contrast directed to the less intellectually ambitious and to the wider public.

---

[42] On the expansion of the print in eighteenth century Britain, see Paul Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People. England, 1727-1783* (Oxford, 1989), Wilfrid Prest, *Albion Ascendant. English History, 1660-1815* (New York, 1998) and Kathleen Wilson, *The Sense of the People. Politics, Culture and Imperialism in England, 1715-1785* (New York, 1995).

Down the print ladder lay cheap, handy-sized editions aimed at the general public. Trimmed of material which the reader might find tedious, such as routine or technical details of the journeys, these publications brought to the fore the bizarre and adventurous in order to fulfil the public's expectations for strange places and peoples. At the bottom end of the market, chap-books and booklets targeted supposedly simple readers; hence their authors felt no need to keep abreast of current knowledge and limited themselves to repeat traditional stereotypes. Here medieval romances and images lived on as the conducting thread of the story, which was generally peopled by valiant Christian heroes and evil Saracens[43].

The expanding world of journals and newspapers profited from the popularity of accounts of remote lands. Scholarly periodicals addressed the scientific pursuits accomplished in the period and chronicled them with a mind for accurateness, specialisation and learned language. The Royal Society published many of the communications of the travellers it supported in its *Philosophical Transactions*; *Archaeologia* included sections on Asian antiquities while material on Asia, America and the Pacific appeared regularly in the *Annual Register*.

For the greater part of the public, however, the more popular periodicals, such as the *Gentleman's Magazine* and the *London Magazine*, were the main sources regarding exotic and faraway regions. They reviewed travel books and included extracts from

---

[43] P. J. Marshall and Glyndwr Williams, *The Great Map of Mankind. Perceptions of New Worlds in the Age of Enlightenment* (London, 1982), chapter 2.

them, often becoming long serials. They published reports on English military and commercial ventures abroad, praising the brave deeds of their countrymen against strange peoples, geographies and climates or lambasting the savagery of the natives, their horrid customs and the cruelties inflicted to settlers. Even literary journals such as the *Critical Review* and the *Monthly Review* reflected the demand for this sort of narratives by dealing with travel books, both British and foreign, as part of their usual literary staple.

Novels and imaginative literature were influenced by the success of travel narratives, as it is the case of *Gulliver's Travels* and *Robinson Crusoe*. Both novels are also examples of the blurred boundaries between the factual and the fictional concerning travel literature. Swift's *Gulliver* made references to current knowledge and was often edited with maps, all of which infused the novel with a tinge of reality, while *Robinson* clearly left many readers in doubt whether it was just Defoe's creation or an account based on real facts. Hoaxes and misinformation abounded; vivid descriptions of semi-humans and giants occasionally appeared in journals and chap-books, while imaginary travels around isolated regions of the world were sometimes taken as truthful and reprinted even once the deception was revealed. It was thus not surprising that in the eyes of many only a thin line separated fact from fiction and that imaginative literature could be sometimes taken as genuine[44].

---

[44] See Marshall and Williams, *The Great Map of Mankind*, chapter 2. For the influence of travel literature and the exotic in eighteenth century English theatre, see Kathleen Wilson, 'Empire of Virtue. The Imperial Project and Hanoverian

In addition, popular imagination was captivated through visual means. Travel accounts were often accompanied by illustrations of tropical scenery and exotic peoples which strengthened their appeal among the public. Besides, pictorial descriptions increased the quality of the information that reached Europe, especially towards the end of the century when artists were commonly found as part of the crew of the expeditions of discovery. In spite of this, there were also illustrators who based their work on written information and whose depictions were misleading and inaccurate[45].

Voyages of discovery were expected to gather objects of different sorts whose interest lay in their status as 'curiosities' or 'rarities' rather than in their aesthetical or commercial value. Once in the metropolis, this material was arranged in collections and either kept in private hands or publicly displayed in the recently created museums such as the British Museum in London. These objects had often a clear ethnographic value and provided scholars and the general public with the material context of the cultures they were studying or reading about. Yet, these collections were seldom subjected to serious study or research; they were generally considered an enjoyable spectacle and not valuable material suitable for scientific purposes. Hoaxes also abounded. In mid-century, specimens of mermaids were not difficult to find in

---

Culture', in Lawrence Stone (ed.), *An Imperial State at War. Britain from 1689 to 1815* (London & New York, 1994), pp. 128-164.

[45]Marshall and Williams, *The Great Map of Mankind*, chapter 2.

Britain. These alleged 'mermaids' were just a compound of the upper part of a monkey's body and the lower part of a fish[46].

The field of 'exotic curiosities' was not limited to material things. Human beings were exhibited as part of the bounty of the voyages of discovery. Once in Europe they could be shown different degrees of respect. Some of them were displayed alongside rarities and monstrosities, and toured around the country, facing eventually a tragic fate. Others became the sensation of polite circles and royal courts. This was the case of Omai and Ahutoru who, brought from the Pacific by Captain Fourneaux and Bougainville respectively, were largely commented on as the perfect embodiment of the 'noble savage'[47].

Artefacts of ancient Asian civilisations were increasingly popular during the eighteenth century. They were given aesthetic value and considered the remaining witnesses to the primeval and even biblical ages of man; accordingly, they were not regarded merely as curios but avidly collected as prized works of art. Egyptian antiquities were the most appreciated both by private collectors and by museums, to a point that Egyptian patterns and images became fashionable as architectural motifs. Hindu

---

[46] See Marshall and Williams, *The Great Map of Mankind* and G. S. Rousseau and Roy Porter, 'Introduction: Approaching Enlightenment Exoticism', in G. S. Rousseau and Roy Porter (eds.), *Exoticism in the Enlightenment* (Manchester & New York, 1990).

[47] See J. C. Beaglehole, 'Eighteenth Century Science and the Voyages of Discovery', *New Zealand Journal of History*, 3, (1969), pp. 107-123 and Rousseau and Porter, 'Introduction: Approaching Enlightenment Exoticism' in G. S. Rousseau and Roy Porter (eds.), *Exoticism in the Enlightenment* (Manchester & New York, 1990).

sculpture aroused serious interest, although few pieces had reached Britain by the end of the eighteenth century[48].

As a result of the progresses made by the voyages of discovery and the popularity and availability of travel literature, the range of information available for eighteenth century European scholars was considerably enlarged. The world known to the West had certainly expanded as progresses were made in the Pacific, North America, West Africa, China and Tibet. It was felt that the whole of mankind was displayed for the Europeans to know. In addition, the wealth of knowledge about faraway lands and societies was richer and more objective. While in the sixteenth century and partly in the seventeenth century, enquiries about non-European societies were mainly reports concerning Spanish America and depended primarily on Spanish materials, in the eighteenth century French, Dutch and British sources filled the scholars' cabinets. Indigenous sources became gradually available thanks to the translations of Chinese, Hindu and Islamic texts which followed the development of linguistics and the birth of Orientalism[49].

The very nature of this kind of literature had also changed, moving away from the mere collection of anecdotes towards an effort to portray distant societies and customs in a rigorous, systematic and meaningful way. The seventeenth century had

---

[48] See Rousseau and Porter, 'Introduction: Approaching Enlightenment Exoticism' in Rousseau and Porter (eds.), *Exoticism* and Marshall and Williams, *The Great Map of Mankind*, chapter 2.

[49] See Marshall and Williams, *The Great Map of Mankind*, Pagden, *European Encounters* and Edward W. Said, *Orientalismo* (Madrid, 1990).

already witnessed this change in orientation, mainly in the French area, where Jesuit missionaries produced detailed accounts imbued with a spirit of objectivity and even certain hints of cultural relativism. Besides, from the seventeenth century onwards, those interested in the world outside Europe did not have to turn solely to missionaries' and travellers' reports. It became increasingly common to present these accounts, both current and past, edited for the public by armchair scholars who would purge them of the marvellous and uncanny. At the same time, they strived to give coherence to materials incongruent and fragmentary, and to replace religious zeal and narrow-mindedness by impartiality and a learned perspective[50].

Cartography had developed from the seventeenth century into a form more suitable to the interests of the natural historian. Even if it was a field concerned mainly with the task of expanding the knowledge of physical geography, a mixture of physical and human geography was becoming gradually more common by the turn of the century. An example of this change of focus can be found in the work of John Reinhold Forster, who in his *Observations made during a Voyage round the World* combined botanical, zoological, geological and geographical information with materials of an ethnographic kind on the social, domestic and racial characteristics of the territories he visited[51].

---

[50] See Marshall and Williams, *The Great Map of Mankind* and Pagden, *European Encounters*.

[51] See Nicholas Thomas, Harriet Guest and Michael Dettelbach (eds.), *Observations made during a Voyage round the World* (Honolulu, 1996).

Although the acquisition and interpretation of knowledge about the world had become a major intellectual concern of educated Englishmen, yet Britain, as compared to France, lacked the central direction and organisation provided by the apparatus of royal patronage and state-sponsored academies of the latter country. In spite of the role played by the Royal Society, which considered knowledge of the world and its peoples a branch of science worth promoting, eighteenth century British travel literature owed less to institutional encouragement than to private initiatives with commercial profits in mind.

Commercial ventures and interests were connected to travel literature, whose popularity was thus related to the mercantile and colonial ambitions of the European powers. Commercial bonanza and constant warfare linked to overseas strategic objectives heightened awareness of far away regions among the British public and ruling classes. North America, India and the Ottoman empire figured prominently in British foreign policy and diplomatic agenda. Colonial produce was increasingly available as affordable commodities for the middle classes and even the lower strata of society. People of all social conditions followed the fortunes of the British military and mercantile fleets through an expanding printing culture which also canvassed expansionist policies and the cult of commerce for the eager British public. As we have seen, the press, the novel and the theatre served as vehicles for the exoticism of the outside world to reach wide sections of the population while contributing to the important role that empire

and commerce played on the formation of national identities and political sensibilities[52].

European governments encouraged voyages of discovery driven primarily by their interest in trade. Even the projects more concerned with scientific pursuits devoted much of their time to collect useful information about trading itineraries, and to locate ports of call for ships on long commercial routes. The quest for a northern passage around America and Asia was frequently one of the main objectives of such ventures. Even missionary reports showed this preoccupation with commercial advantage and national interest. Thus, for instance, Charlevoix's account of North American French colonies and their indigenous inhabitants was regularly driven by these concerns, pointing out how to best take advantage of the existing resources or ways of maximising the profits which the colonies rendered to the metropolis[53].

Nevertheless, being also the product of the scientific ferment, eighteenth century voyages of discovery were aimed at enlarging Europe's knowledge of the world, hence providing the Enlightenment's intellectual endeavours with a much valued material due to its accurateness and scientific quality. Voyages of discovery were influential not only in the development of the natural history of man but also in the advancement of a wide range of scientific disciplines. Just as enlightened philosophers were obliged to men like Cook for the wealth of information which his voyages supplied regarding Pacific cultures, astronomers, biologists

[52] See chapter 2 of this PhD thesis.

[53] See Marshall and Williams, *The Great Map of Mankind*, chapter 2 and Beaglehole, 'Eighteenth Century Science', p. 114.

and geographers were equally indebted to Cook, La Condamine and Maupertius for the observations collected during their sails. During these voyages, Newtonian theories about the shape and the dimensions of the earth were confirmed by French scientists, unknown botanical and zoological specimens were carried to Europe for the biologists' delight, and large collections of insects, eggshells and seashells were stored by individuals and museums. Voyages of discovery depended, in turn, on the progress of the sciences for, without the technological improvements in naval devices and tools of astronomic positioning, few of them would have been able to accomplish such distant routes and complicated journeys[54].

CONJECTURAL HISTORY: THE SCIENCE OF MAN IN THE SCOTTISH ENLIGHTENMENT

Eighteenth century Scottish history was deeply indebted to the Enlightenment's quest for a natural science of man to the point that its favoured mode of historical writing, conjectural history, has often been deemed one of the finest examples of the natural history of man in society. Accordingly, the method of the natural historians and their concerns about human nature were prominent in Alexander's book.

The writing of conjectural history in eighteenth century Scotland could not be fully understood without taking into account the influence of the scientific revolution. The Scottish

[54] See Beaglehole, 'Eighteenth Century Science'.

authors admired the natural sciences for their accuracy and exceptional success and, consequently, adopted many scientific tenets and principles in an effort to endow their own pursuits with the same level of rigour and intellectual soundness.

The Scottish Enlightenment embraced eagerly the natural historical emphasis on rationality, empiricism and general laws in its analysis of human nature. Similarly the insistence on systematicness and on the primacy of facts as the grounds for the exploration of man and his works can be recognised in the conjectural aim of reaching a stable and coherent body of knowledge about human nature and society. Science and natural history provided the Scots with methodological tools, such as the comparative method and the search for causes and effects, while detaching conjectural history from the quest for origins and the abstract thinking which characterised other enlightened authors such as Rousseau[55].

Basic Tenets and Underlying Assumptions

The Scottish conjectural historians adopted the scientific cult of reason as the ultimate safeguard of the truthfulness of their accounts. Although the appeal to rationality was certainly indebted to the fascination of the Scottish enlightened with the methods

---

[55] See Duncan Forbes, 'Introduction', *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (Edinburgh, 1966), Fox, Porter and Wokler (eds.), *Inventing Human Science*, Emerson, 'Science and the Origins of the Scottish Enlightenment', H. M. Höpfl, 'From Savage to Scotsman: Conjectural History in the Scottish Enlightenment', *Journal of British Studies*, 17, (1978), Meek, *Social Science and the Ignoble Savage*, Skinner, 'Natural History', Wood, 'Natural History of Man' and Wood, 'The Science of Man'.

and structure of the natural sciences it should be also linked to the 'debate between the ancients and the moderns' which permeated seventeenth century intellectual discussions and was frequently echoed during the eighteenth century. In the early modern period, the intellectual world became divided between those convinced that the new science could not rival the achievements of the great authors of the past and those convinced that a new era of intellectual excellence had been opened in the post-Renaissance world. The Cartesian discourse attacked the scholastic tradition which placed the immortal soul of man as the core of his essence, elevating reason as the defining quality of man. Reason was also considered the best tool for secure knowledge and the basis of the new philosophical thinking which suited the modern era. As a consequence, the value of past authorities was undermined. Since the soundness of their judgements could no longer be guaranteed by their prestige, the conclusions of previous works were subjected to careful scrutiny[56].

The Scottish philosophers subscribed to the attack on tradition and authority and vindicated the possibility of equalling and even surpassing the thinkers of ancient times. Reliance on authority was replaced by careful judgement of the value of past works and by the belief that truth could only be proved by resorting to the check of reason. As Kames argued, consistent belief should 'be subjected to rational discussion: when confirmed

---

[56] See Roger L. Emerson, 'Conjectural History and Scottish Philosophers', *Historical Papers/Communications historiques [of the Canadian Historical Association]*, (1984), pp. 63-90, Meek, *Social Science and the Ignoble Savage* and Pagden, *European Encounters.*

by reason, it turns more vigorous and authoritative: when contradicted by reason, it disappears among sensible people'[57]. As a result, authoritative figures were carefully scrutinised by the Scots in order to determine their reliability and, although sources from the Antiquity continued to be widely used, their worth was often taken to be relative and open to criticism. In this fashion, Kames directed an attack against Aristotle's logic and declared that 'great names terrify me not' before contradicting St. Augustine regarding polygamy[58].

The vindication of reason as the more secure faculty in order to determine the value of past accounts went together with the defence of empiricism as the foundation of any 'conjecture'. Factual information provided the material upon which reason would derive its conclusions. The misleading opinions of the ancients were set against facts in order to prove their reliability or, by contrast, dismiss them as inaccurate. Reason and facts, therefore, replaced authority as the guarantee of the worth of any philosophical assumption. 'As I neither hope nor wish, that the nature of man, as above delineated, be taken upon my authority', Kames wrote, 'I propose to verify it by clear and substantial facts'[59].

Following the turn towards secularism of the natural sciences, Scottish conjectural history put aside the medieval God-centred, teleological notion of history and focused instead on human

---

[57] Lord Kames, (1778 ed.) 'Of the Progress of the Female Sex', *Sketches of the History of Man* (London, 1993), vol. IV, p. 211.

[58] See Kames, 'Of the Progress of the Female Sex', pp. 305-407.

[59] Kames, 'Of the Progress of the Female Sex', p. 180.

evolution as a product of man's agency. The familiarity of the Scots with scientific knowledge certainly contributed to greater levels of religious tolerance and even scepticism, as proved by Hume's beliefs concerning religion. However, a tendency towards secularism should not be confused with a rejection of God's role in the historical process or considered a sign of atheism or religious indifference. For many among the Scottish writers, such as Kames, their confidence in science and natural history could be easily integrated with their religious faith. Besides, the wise, powerful God of the Calvinist tradition, upon which the Church of Scotland rested, stood without trouble alongside the orderly world revealed by the scientific revolution and its notion of God as the 'watchmaker' that had set nature into motion.

Thus, while most of the Scots interpreted social evolution as the product of man's actions, they also reserved a role for the Divine Providence. For most of them, the history of the human species and the study of human nature illustrated the workings of God. As Paul Wood has remarked, 'the anatomy of human mind and body, as well as man's progress from rudeness to refinement, were generally thought to exemplify the wisdom and benevolence of God'[60] . Many Scottish conjectural historians, such as Kames or Alexander himself, thought that human nature was determined by God, who had endowed man with the necessary capacities and potentiality to successfully fulfil his destiny as the summit of creation[61]. God's role in history was compatible with the Scots'

[60] Wood, 'Natural History of Man', p. 102.

[61] See Carrithers, 'Enlightenment Science of Society', Emerson, 'Science and the Origins of the Scottish Enlightenment' and Wokler, 'Anthropology and

scientific convictions and emphasis on human agency and general laws. As William Robertson argued, 'the Supreme Being conducteth [sic] all his operations by general laws' and he 'seldom effects by supernatural means any thing which could have been accomplished by such as are natural'[62].

Moreover, God's part in human nature acted as a firm guarantee of the ultimately benevolent qualities of man. Created according to the divine will, human nature could not conform to the pessimistic view shared by Hobbes. In spite of their rejection of first premises, the role of the divinity often played this function in the accounts of the authors of the Scottish Enlightenment, mainly when they wanted to prove the natural origin of certain institutions and practices which they deemed beneficial for man in society, such as monogamy or marriage. Kames resorted to this line of argumentation in order to demonstrate that polygamy was unnatural to humankind, a cultural deviance from the principles set in man's mind and spirit by God. After reviewing the benefits and usefulness of monogamy for the animals which, like the human being, coupled for procreation, and surveying the many ills derived from polygamy for family life among the nations which practised it, Kames summarily concluded that monogamous marriage had to be natural to humankind. Certainly God had not implanted in man a tendency productive of many ills and contrary to the survival of the species[63].

Conjectural History'. Also Alexander, *History of Women,* vols. I and II and Lord Kames, (1778 ed.) *Sketches of the History of Man* (London, 1993), 4 vols.

[62] Quoted in Meek, *Social Science and the Ignoble Savage*, p. 136.

[63] See Kames, *Sketches of the History of Man*, vol. II.

The secularisation of human sciences opened the way to a 'sociological' study of religion. The truth or falsity of religious beliefs was no longer the chief concern of the enquiry. Instead, religions came to be understood as another product of human activity, a social factor which, like any other, could vary in time and space and be influenced by the geographic, social, political and cultural milieu. In northern climates and civilised societies, where man acted according to reason and enjoyed the benefits of politeness, religious beliefs were moderate and sincere. By contrast, in hotter climates and savage and barbarous societies, where men were prone to be subjected to their lowest appetites and governed by despotism, religions were fanatical, tyrannical and driven to frenzy and excess[64].

In turn, religions were examined in relation to the influence they exerted upon social arrangements. Religious beliefs were deemed a powerful influence on manners, government types and the general progress of man. Thus, when dealing with medieval Europe, Christianity was often praised for its beneficial effect in humanizing the manners and promoting peace and the progress of knowledge. Islam, conversely, was judged in a much harsher way by the Scots. In a purely orientalist fashion, the doctrines of Mahomet were deemed partly responsible for the debauchery to which the inhabitants of the East had abandoned themselves. Being fully consistent with the pernicious influence and principles

[64] Carrithers, 'Enlightenment Science of Society'.

of despotism, Islam was regarded as the religious counterpart of that system of government[65].

The defining trait of the Scottish natural history of man was its focus on the social. Devoted followers of Bacon, who has been considered by Paul Wood one of the 'intellectual patriarchs of the Scottish Enlightenment'[66], the Scots conflated natural and civil history in their aim to write the natural history of man in his social state. Conjectural history was natural in his intention to track down human diversity and take into account the development of the psychological faculties of men. It comprised also civil history in its determination to place the development of the human being in a chronological framework and in its emphasis on the social.

Most eighteenth century Scottish theorists believed that the study of human societies illuminated the study of human nature and consequently both issues were frequently joined as part of the same intellectual endeavour. Human nature would be better explained not by the actions of particular individuals but rather by concentrating on the operations of groups of individuals since, as Ferguson remarked, 'men have always acted in troops or companies'. To study the individual alone would be thus to study human nature out of its 'natural state'. Man in society became a focal point of the Scottish enquiries to an extent that society

---

65 See Carrithers, 'Enlightenment Science of Society'. For examples of the role of religion in social evolution see, Adam Ferguson, (1767 ed.) *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (Edinburgh, 1966), John Gregory, (1774 ed.) *A Comparative View of the State and Faculties of Man with Those of the Animal World* (London & Tokyo, 1994), Kames, *Sketches of the History of Man* and Alexander, *History of Women,* volumes I and II.

66 See Wood, 'Natural History of Man', p. 90.

eventually emerged as a realm of its own, not completely detached from the actions of the individuals but yet remaining a somehow closed sphere. Society was conceptualised as an amalgam of small groups, instead of as an association of particular persons, and it was detached from the intervention of individual actions. Society was consequently 'a realm of social phenomena obeying its own laws and displaying its own patterns not directly traceable to the actions of particular individuals'[67].

The focus on the social went together with a minimisation of the role of individuals in shaping the course of history. This approach to the analysis of social phenomena, inherited from authors such as Vico, has been termed by Ronald Meek as 'the law of unintended consequences'. According to the Scots, even if human progress was certainly determined by the sum of individual actions, as men were not conscious of the final outcome of their doings, human evolution would be better understood by focusing on regularities and general trends. Adam Ferguson clearly stated this principle of social analysis in his book *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*:

> mankind, in following the present sense of their minds, in striving to remove inconveniences, or to gain apparent and contiguous advantages, arrive at ends which even their imagination could no anticipate; and pass on, like other animals, in the tract of their nature, without perceiving its end…

---

[67] Carrithers, 'Enlightenment Science of Society', p. 236. See also Fox, Porter and Wokler (eds.), *Inventing Human Science*, Höpfl, 'From Savage to Scotsman', Skinner, 'Natural History' and Wood, 'Natural History of Man'.

> every step and every movement of the multitude, even in what are termed enlightened ages, are made with equal blindness to the future; and nations stumble upon establishments, which are indeed the result of human action, but not the execution of any human design[68].

Moreover, in the Scots' point of view, societies evolved and changed according to the interplay of a variety of factors of a social kind and not due to the intervention of any 'great man' or 'law-giver'. The Scots argued that the role of outstanding historical figures was determined by the social milieu in which they lived and, consequently, any action of consequence they might had produced was the result of their historical background rather than the effect of exceptionality and genius. Millar maintained that the actions of these great men have been generally 'exaggerated and misrepresented' since, as Ferguson remarked, 'the crowd of mankind are directed in their establishments and measures by the circumstances in which they are placed; and seldom are turned from their way, to follow the plan of any single projector'[69]. These aspects were emphasised in Alexander's *History of Women*, as nothing could be less relevant for a history of women than conquests and political genealogies.

The Scottish philosophers thought that rationally-grounded knowledge on human societies could be found and was to be sought. Avid readers of travel writing and past historical accounts, the Scottish literati thought they were well equipped with the

---

[68] Ferguson, *History of Civil Society*, p. 205.

[69] John Millar, (1779 ed.) *The Origin of the Distinction of Ranks,* repr. in Lehmann, W. C., *John Millar of Glasgow, 1735-1801. His Life and his Contribution to Sociological Analysis* (Glasgow, 1960), p. 178, and Ferguson, *History of Civil Society*, p. 121.

factual information which would provide them with the empirical foundation for their ultimate aim: to explore human social evolution in its multiplicity. Human diversity was not only a pool of information to resort to, it was the social equivalent to the scientific multiplicity of events, an apparent chaotic ground which the natural historian of man, like the scientist, could and should arrange by discovering its hidden regularities. In addition, the focus on diversity endowed Scottish conjectural history with a holistic perspective. The enquiry on social evolution was not restricted to the realm of institutions, laws or forms of government; the variety of customs, family arrangements, manners, feelings and ideas were considered to be equally relevant to their pursuit. David Carrithers has emphasised the multiplicity of issues discussed by the Scottish philosophers;

> these included the natural, that is noncontractual, origins of civil society; the evolutionary origins of property, government, and justice; the role of such natural sentiments as benevolence and sympathy as contributors to the social bonding; the origins and implications of the social division of labour; the impact on legal systems of the advent of property and of changing modes of subsistence; the relation between governmental types and underlying psychological and social conditions; the influence of such physical causes such as climate, geography, and extent of territory on human behaviour and thus, indirectly, on societal development; the functionalist interaction of the structural components of society to produce a "general spirit", or "national character"; and the extent to which human character, behaviour, ideas, tastes, and impressions are fashioned by (…) the "mirror of society"[70].

[70] Carrithers, 'Enlightenment Science of Society', p. 235. See also Emerson, 'Science and the Origins of the Scottish Enlightenment'.

Even if human experience was to be considered in its multiplicity, the enquiry could comprise the wide range of aspects relevant for human evolution or concentrate on particular aspects. Adam Ferguson, for instance, chose to devote his attention to a particular historical process, the development of civil society, and analyse it taking into account all the aspects relevant for his query. Similarly, Alexander comprised issues of a very different kind in his study of the historical evolution of women's situation. Some of the themes he dealt with were common to the conjectural endeavour, such as legal arrangements or modes of subsistence. However, Alexander, conscious that he was opening a new field within conjectural history, decided to give prominence to certain topics such as amusements, dress and ornaments which were not frequently found in conjectural accounts of the history of man. Alexander, thus, took advantage of the holistic emphasis of conjectural history to shape the conjectural project according to the main subject of his enquiry, women, introducing those aspects of human life which he deemed would be relevant to understand female evolution or which would appeal to the female reader.

John Gregory's *A Comparative View of the State and Faculties of Man*, by contrast, revolved around the issues of nurturing and caring for the offspring and the progress of man's finest faculties. In the case of Kames's *Sketches of the History of Man*, the conjectural project could be fragmented attending one by one to the aspects which composed social experience (progress of property, forms of government, women, population, morality and even taxation, among others) in order to achieve a comprehensive account by the sum of all of them. It was thus possible to adapt the conjectural

project in order to review the progress of women throughout time and space, as Alexander did, without altering fundamentally its basic characteristics.

The focus on social arrangements did not involve a relegation of the subject of human nature to a secondary role. It maintained its central role for it was believed that human nature was a social product, influenced by the complex array of moral and physical influences operating in any given society. Therefore, human nature was not a purely immanent concept which remained immutable across geographical and historical variables. It was rather malleable, adapting itself to the circumstances surrounding man. As Ferguson argued, 'the species has a progress as well as the individual; they build in every subsequent age on foundations formerly laid; and, in a succession of years tend to a perfection in the application of their faculties'[71]. In short, for the Scottish enlightened, different social conditions produced different 'human natures' which were typical of each social stage. Savage societies, for instance, were productive of a rough, somehow insensitive frame of mind while despotic states brought into being a soft, effete and submissive type of man. Such a vision of human nature was deeply indebted to the environmentalist medical theories which emphasised the influence of lifestyle and habit on the workings of the body and, particularly, on human sensibility[72].

Even so, the Scottish theorists believed firmly that there was an unalterable core in human nature that remained unscathed by

---

[71] Ferguson, *History of Civil Society*, p. 5.

[72] Smith, 'The Language of Human Nature'.

external circumstances. This permanent foundation of the human being should be sought mainly in the interplay of passions and needs within the human being and in man's psychological characteristics. Men all over the world and in any historical period were supposed to be endowed with reason, to respond to the same animal appetites and passions, to be possessed of social affections and to share a common drive towards improvement and progress. As Millar argued,

> there is, however, in man a disposition and capacity for improving his condition, by the exertion of which, he is carried on from one degree of advancement to another; and the similarity of his wants, as well as of the faculties by which these wants are supplied, has everywhere produced a remarkable uniformity in the several steps of his progression[73].

These universal characteristics of human nature allowed the Scots to search for general laws, surmount the distinctiveness peculiar to time and place, and reduce human diversity to regularity and order. As Kames remarked, 'when we investigate the causes of certain effects, the reasoning is often founded upon the known nature of man'[74].

In addition, the belief on a universal notion of human nature shared by mankind led many Scots to depart from the division of the human being into different species endorsed by Linnaeus. The

---

[73] Millar, *The Origin of the Distinction of Ranks*, p. 176.

[74] Kames, 'Of the Progress of the Female Sex', p. 213. See also Fox, Porter and Wokler (eds.), *Inventing Human Science*, particularly Smith, 'The Language of Human Nature'. Also Emerson, 'Science and the Origins of the Scottish Enlightenment' and Wood, 'Natural History of Man'.

attack on Linnaean taxonomy was explicit in Alexander's *History of Women*: 'the human genus has, with no small degree of probability, been divided by naturalists into several species, each marked with corporeal differences, which could hardly arise from custom or from climate, and with intellectual powers scarcely less indicative of this division than the marks of their bodies'[75].

Man's evolution in society made possible the examination of the transformations in human nature, from its original state, close to the animals, to the civilised state, where appetites were bound by the progress of politeness, sociability and, in short, culture. The transformation of the savage man into the polite man reflected ancient ideas about the primacy of the soul over the body which were now translated into a modern vocabulary, suitable for the times. The savage man was dominated by its physicality, by its animal and bodily appetites while the civilised man emerged as a moral man, whose rational abilities had taken full control of his passions allowing them to be expressed only in the refined interplay of polite sociability. In this fashion, the divide between the savage and the civilised man replaced the old body/soul dichotomy. Even Adam Ferguson, who in his *Essay on the History of Civil Society* was reluctant to condemn savage societies to utmost rudeness, had to concede that savage sensibility was innocent, passionate and unbiased and, therefore, more akin to that of the children than to that of the complex, fully rational adult[76].

---

[75] Alexander, *History of Women, II*, p. 44.

[76] Wokler, 'Anthropology and Conjectural History' and Ferguson, *History of Civil Society*.

In Alexander's work the passage from the physical to the moral man had important consequences for women. Men dominated by their passions and appetites confined women behind the walls of the harems since they believed that control of women's bodies was essential to foster female chastity. In the North, where reason had developed and informed all aspects of polite life, women were deemed rational beings and chastity was protected by enforcing this principle upon the female mind and not by imprisoning their bodies away from the male gaze. As a result, European women were free to mix with men within the circles of refined sociability. As Alexander remarked, 'in the south, while every possible restriction is laid on the body, they hardly make use of one single precept to bind the mind. In the north, while they lay every possible restriction on the mind, the body is left entirely at liberty'[77]. Therefore, in Alexander's account, the physical man, dominated by the body, sought to control women's body and deprive women from freedom while the moral man, impelled by his rational powers, awarded women a fairer and more equal status.

Methodology: Induction, Comparison, the Search for Causal Patterns and the Four Stages Theory

The Comparative Method

Inherent to the methodology of the Scottish conjectural historians was the comparative method, by which they inferred

[77] Alexander, *History of Women, II*, p. 41.

conclusions about human nature by putting side by side different stages of human evolution and animal and human behaviour.

Like Bacon, many among the Scots resorted to comparisons between the human and the animal world as an intellectual tool. This type of comparisons were drawn generally regarding those aspects of human development and human life which were thought to be closer to nature, in its positive meaning of an instinctive stage, unbiased by culture. Marriage, love and childrearing were subjected to comparisons with the customs of the animal world in order to determine which practices were more natural – that is, necessary and beneficial – to humankind. The use of comparisons between the animal and the natural world was not only one of Bacon's legacies. The Scottish fondness for this kind of analogies should be also linked to the influence of Buffon and Linnaeus. Both authors had placed man alongside animals in their works, which provided the Scottish authors with a fund of factual information about the natural kingdom which they introduced in their enquiries about human societies. Buffon was particularly influential since he had emphasised the importance of manners and customs in the classification of zoological and human species[78].

The comparative method was championed by John Gregory in his *A Comparative View of the State and Faculties of Man*. Published in 1765, it comprised a series of discourses delivered before the Aberdeen Philosophical Society in the years 1758 to 1763. This

[78] Fox, Porter and Wokler (eds.), *Inventing Human Science*, particularly Sloan, 'The Gaze of Natural History' and Smith, 'The Language of Human Nature'. See also Wood, 'Natural History of Man' and Wood, 'The Science of Man'.

work sustained a clear vindication of Baconian principles and methods. In its first pages, Gregory denounced that one of the obstacles to the progress of the natural history of man was the lack of analogies between man and animals. Echoing the notion of the chain of beings, Gregory argued that, since nature was ordered in a continuum, 'no one link of the great chain can be perfectly understood, without the knowledge, at least, of the links that are nearest to it'[79]. He urged on the necessity of comparisons between the constitution of man and that of animals which juxtaposed not only their physiologies but also their 'states and manners of life'.

Comparisons between the customs of animals and those of modern societies were used by Gregory to fire a harsh criticism on the current state of family affairs, particularly on childrearing. Like Rousseau in his book *Émile*, he endorsed methods closer to nature, criticised wet nurses and encouraged mothers to have a greater involvement in the first years of the child's education. For the most part of the first volume, natural history was merged in Gregory's account with prescription; thus he advocated renouncing the artificiality brought about by the excesses of culture and going back to the simplest forms of family care consistent with nature and instinct. Gregory's turn towards prescription is hardly surprising since he was the author of one of the best-selling pieces of prescriptive literature of the century, *A Father's Legacy to his Daughters*.

The domain which the Scottish philosophers chose for their comparisons with the natural world, the domestic realm of human

---

[79] Gregory, *A Comparative View*, vol. I, p. 11.

affairs, favoured the normative bias of this approach. Accordingly, Kames used material from the animal kingdom to explore whether monogamy and marriage were natural to man or not. As he remarked, 'as the means provided by nature for continuing the race of other animals may probably throw light upon the economy of nature with respect to man; I begin with that article'[80]. Since the animals closer to man in their manners and form of living developed a monogamous and stable bond to care for the offspring, he concluded that man, too, was endowed by Providence with the same monogamous instinct which was so advantageous for survival: 'if analogy [between animals and humans] can be rely'd [sic] on, the affirmative must be held, as there is no other creature in the known world to which pairing is so necessary'[81]. Even if domesticity was the work of culture, as proved by the lack of tender feelings among savage couples, monogamous marriage was instinctive, natural in man and thus should be pursued as one of the advantages for human life.

Similarly, Kames used comparisons between the animal and the human world in his sketch on the 'Origin of National Societies' to explore the social tendencies inherent in human nature. 'As many animals, beside man, are social', Kames argued, 'it appeared to me probable that the social laws by which such animals are governed, might open views into the social nature of men'[82]. Examining the behaviour of gregarious species closest to man in

[80] Kames, 'Of the Progress of the Female Sex', p. 9.

[81] Kames, 'Of the Progress of the Female Sex', p. 10.

[82] Kames, 'Of the Progress of the Female Sex', p. 155.

their customs and necessities, he was able to conclude that man was naturally endowed with social tendencies which were essential for the survival of the species but also the source of many pleasures and affections[83].

For other authors, such as Adam Ferguson, there was not ground for comparisons between animals and men. He firmly criticised those authors who used these analogies as a foundation for their conclusions because the gap between man and animals was too wide to allow any lawful comparison: 'in his rudest state, he [man] is found to be above them [animals]; and in his greatest degeneracy never descends to their level'[84].

The influence of Bacon on the Scottish philosophers goes beyond their use of the comparative method. Gregory, like many among the Scots censored the principles of iatromechanism and pointed out, instead, like Bacon, the necessity of a unified science of man which encompassed the study of mind and body and their interrelations. The Baconian appeal to the investigation of the mind and its relations with the body as a part of a science of man was, moreover, reinforced by the Scots' fondness for the principles of environmental medicine. Thus, the Scottish philosophers were 'not concerned simply with the animal economy of the body treated as a self-contained, fixed system; rather, [they] focused on the dynamic interactions of body, mind, society and

---

[83] See George Jr. Stocking, 'Scotland as a Model for Mankind: Lord Kames' Philosophical View of Civilization', in Timothy H. H. Thorensen (ed.), *Toward a Science of Man: Essays in the History of Anthropology* (The Hague, 1975), pp. 65-89.

[84] Ferguson, *History of Civil Society*, p. 6.

environment'[85]. Along these lines, Gregory was able to couple the defence of comparisons between the anatomy of animals and men with his dissertation on the finest faculties of the human mind while Kames combined the study of the evolution of morality and theology with sketches on population, government and the physical constraints of savage life.

General Causes and Human Evolution

As important to understand the work of the Scottish writers as their use of observation, experimentation and comparison was their belief on the existence of discernible causes which help to reveal the patterns displayed by social phenomena. This conviction was essential to the Scots' confidence on the possibility of interpreting human actions as part of broader patterns, through which the social evolution of mankind could be explained, and which could be reached through a scientific and rational method. As Roger Smith has remarked, conjectural history focused on the 'relations between causes and effects in social experience, insofar as they could be generalized into an understanding of the conditions of social achievement and failure, rather than on the particular historical facts of unique events'[86].

The Scots' belief on the existence of external influences acting upon human nature was thoroughly consistent with their scientific approach to the study of man and society. Hume, for instance, was convinced that through careful study and observation the

[85] Wood, 'Natural History of Man', p. 93.

[86] Smith, 'The Language of Human Nature', p. 103.

regularities underlying human actions could be grasped and that these regularities were similar to the causal structure explaining the phenomena of nature. In addition, the Scots' adoption of causality as a methodological tool reinforced their belief that the study of society was the best way to pursue a science of man because, although these external causes were negligible when taking into account individual actions, they were of critical importance when considering man acting in groups[87]. Besides, the attention to the external causes shaping human experience allowed the Scots to successfully reconcile their emphasis on the universal sameness of human nature with the observed diversity of human arrangements. As Alexander remarked,

> the various individuals which compose the human genus, though in many respects exactly similar in all ages and countries, in others are so dissimilar that they can hardly be considered as stamped with the same character, or endowed with the same feelings. Their similarity is in all times and places the effect of nature; their dissimilarity the effect of art, and of the habits and customs which have arisen from it[88].

In this respect, the Scots were deeply indebted to Montesquieu, who had affirmed that social facts exhibited causal relations. According to him these causes were of two kinds: physical and moral. The former, such as climate, operated mainly on the human body, relaxing the fibres or providing a spur to physical action. The latter, such as custom and education, generally

---

[87] Carrithers, 'Enlightenment Science of Society' and Skinner, 'Natural History'.

[88] Alexander, *History of Women, I*, p. 114.

acted upon the mind. Both types were thought to modify and determine human evolution by favouring progress or by setting certain limits to advancement. Montesquieu's theories were well received by the Scottish philosophers who coupled his insistence on the influence of physical conditions with the Buffonian notion of degeneration and with environmental medical theories, in order to elucidate the immobility and resilience to change of certain societies such as the Eastern nations[89].

Physical factors played a key role in the Scottish conjectural histories. It is worth quoting a lengthy passage from John Millar's *The Origin of the distinction of Ranks*, which summarises the Scots' standpoint regarding the influence of physical factors on human societies:

> in searching for the causes of those peculiar systems of law and government which have appeared in the world, we must undoubtedly resort, first of all, to the difference of situation, which have suggested different views and motives of actions to the inhabitants of particular countries. Of this kind, are the fertility or barrenness of the soil, the nature of its productions, the species of labour requisite for procuring the subsistence, the number of individuals collected together in one community, their proficiency in arts, the advantages they enjoy for maintaining an intimate correspondence. The variety that frequently occurs in these, and such other particulars, must have a prodigious influence upon the great body of a people; as, by giving a peculiar direction to their inclinations and pursuits, it must

[89] See Wokler, 'Anthropology and Conjectural History', Melvin Richter, 'Montesquieu's Theory and Practice of the Comparative Method', *History of the Human Sciences*, 15, (2002), pp. 21-33 and Carrithers, 'Enlightenment Science of Society'.

> be productive of correspondent habits, dispositions and ways of thinking[90].

Climate and, particularly, the way of procuring subsistence were deemed basic elements affecting the way in which a society evolved. This was the case of the *Sketches of the History of Man* in which, following Montesquieu and Buffon, Kames blamed the extremely harsh living conditions of the American Indians for their lack of sexual drive which was responsible for their low population and short degree of advancement. Adam Ferguson in his *Essay on the History of Civil Society* believed that climate and the characteristics of a nation's soil influenced the progress of the arts and of political liberties. For him, environmental challenges constituted a stimulus to the progressive nature of man. In colder climates, men had to overcome obstacles which did not exist in milder areas. It was not surprising, therefore, that man in Europe had advanced more than in the southern regions of the world: 'men do more when they have certain difficulties to surmount than when they have supposed blessings to enjoy: and the shade of the barren oak and the pine are more favourable to the genius of mankind than that of the palm or the tamarind'[91].

However, most of the Scots, like Montesquieu himself, rejected climate determinism and affirmed that moral causes were more influential than physical causes. As Millar argued,

---

[90] Millar, *The Origin of the Distinction of Ranks* p. 175.

[91] Ferguson, *History of Civil Society*, p. 119. See also Wokler, 'Anthropology and Conjectural History' and Carrithers, 'Enlightenment Science of Society'.

> in the history of the world, we see no regular marks of that secret influence which has been ascribed to the air and climate, but on the contrary, may commonly explain the great difference in the manners and customs of mankind from other causes, the existence of which is capable of being more clearly ascertained[92].

Education, religion or the type of government were factors which strongly affected the course of human evolution, clearing the way towards the progress inherent to human nature or, by contrast, becoming strong impediments to the tendency towards advancement. Since moral factors acted upon man's psychology, this approach could more easily coexist with the belief that the basic sameness shared by humankind rested on psychological traits, needs and potentialities. The Scots were thus keen to explore how the tyranny of custom and barbarity could deter man's path towards progress while the benefits of refined manners opened the way towards sociability and improvement.

Although the focus on causality as the basis of the regular patterns governing social evolution entailed a belief on a certain degree of predictability underlying human development, the Scots were aware that the history of mankind often departed from these regular patterns. Due to their attention to facts and insistence on empiricism, the conjectural historians were aware that human evolution included extraordinary developments and situations which escaped rational explanation. As Kames remarked, 'the operation of a general cause may be disturbed by particular

[92] Millar, *The Origin of the Distinction of Ranks*, p. 178.

circumstances'[93]. Chance and randomness, therefore, were not excluded when examining the interplay of causes and consequences which explained social evolution. In order to deal with the variableness of human affairs, even if the Scots gave preference to certain factors, such as economic activities or government types, they clearly rejected a pattern of social evolution ruled by elements of a specific kind. It was by examining the multiplicity of factors acting upon a human group that a clear understanding of it would emerge.

Besides, there was not a single pattern of causation which could explain all social evolution, or a stable hierarchy of causes acting upon the sphere of human affairs. Certain causes may be hidden at times, lose their effect due to the operation of other factors previously insignificant or be overridden by the growth in importance of conditions of a different kind. This was the case of religion, a powerful force determining the course of society at certain times and places, such as the Eastern nations or medieval Europe, but a minor element in other cases, as when dealing with current European societies. Like Montesquieu, the Scottish conjectural historians adopted in their social analysis 'a holistic perspective envisioning societies as systems of interdependent and integrated structural components'[94].

Nevertheless, the conjectural perseverance in determining the causes acting upon a particular human group did not lead to a functionalist perspective of social analysis. The Scots were mainly

---

[93] Kames, 'Of the Progress of the Female Sex', p. 334.

[94] Carrithers, 'Enlightenment Science of Society', p. 254.

concerned with social evolution, in line with their belief that motion was an essential trait of human nature. Man was naturally driven towards progress and action and accordingly society could be never static but in permanent flux. Thus, although the Scots were keen on exploring the characteristics of particular stages of man's social development, they were also interested in change[95].

The Inductive Method

The Scottish philosophers believed that, since the study of man in society was little different from the experimentation of the natural sciences, the inductive method could and should be employed in the search for general principles governing social phenomena. Conjectures securely grounded on rationality and on sufficient and reliable facts were considered as scientific and trustworthy as the conclusions obtained in the laboratory by the student of nature. By taking into account the universality of human nature, subjecting the data to thorough comparisons, and examining the causes acting upon societies at a given period or time, it was possible to reach evolutionary patterns which could be applied to different human situations. Thus for the Scottish historians it was possible to envisage the four stages theory which allowed them to reduce to order human evolution and endow with meaning the multiplicity of human experience[96].

Deduction was a path less trodden by the Scots who were deeply suspicious of the merely deductive thought of Descartes,

---

[95] Carrithers, 'Enlightenment Science of Society'.

[96] Emerson, 'Science and the Origins of the Scottish Enlightenment'.

Rousseau, Hobbes and the contractualists. They firmly opposed the Cartesian maxim 'Cogito, ergo sum' because it was grounded on pure supposition and lacked any evidence to sustain it. Their rejection of deduction from first premises was coherent with their refusal to pursue queries on the origins of social arrangements and institutions. Theirs was the quest for the grounds of human evolution and not a search for a primeval origin for which they had little empirical material to resort to. As Ferguson remarked, 'the character of man, as he now exists (…) deserve our principal study', 'whatever may have been the original state of our species, it is of more importance to know the condition to which we ourselves should aspire, than that which our ancestors may be supposed to have left'[97].

The Four Stages Theory

The four stages theory was one of the finest methodological tools developed by the Scottish conjectural historians in their analysis of human societies and nature. It offered the Scots a conceptual framework within which the diversity of human experience could be integrated into an orderly and coherent pattern. The four stages theory certainly provided the Scots with an analytical tool with which they could benefit from observation and comparison in order to disclose the regularities that governed social evolution.

This theory of socio-economic development, in its most general form, argued that the mode of subsistence was the key

[97] Ferguson, *History of Civil Society*, p. 3 and p. 10.

factor in the process of civilisation. Central to this theory was the belief that societies could be classified according to the main activity their inhabitants applied themselves to and, moreover, that the features of each social stage were linked to its main economic activity. Thus, societies which drew their resources from the same economic means were thought to share similar features across time and space. According to this theory, societies progressed over time through four consecutive stages, each corresponding to a different mode of subsistence: hunting, pasturage, agriculture and commerce. Different sets of ideas and institutions regarding law, property and government and also different customs, manners and morals corresponded to each of these modes of subsistence.

Hunting and gathering marked the first stage of human development. It was characterised by the lack of structured forms of government, the absence of property and the absolute equality of its members. These societies, however, did not embody the happy state of nature depicted by Rousseau. In spite of the advantages of the egalitarian social organisation, man had to toil hard to procure his necessaries due to the hostile natural environment and to the primitive stage of his technological development. Primitive societies were not blessed by the gifts of a bountiful nature, as in Rousseau's account, but rather resembled the bitter conditions in which current savage societies lived. It should be noted that the Scots grounded their descriptions of the first stage on travellers' accounts of North American societies, particularly by Lafitau and Cornelius de Pauw who had stressed the roughness of the material conditions of the Native Americans and the wretchedness of their existence. With the only exception of

Adam Ferguson, the Scottish enlightened left virtually no room for images of the 'noble savage' and the blissful 'state of nature' in their descriptions of man's primitive existence[98].

The following stage was the pastoral one, defined by man's move from hunting to rearing cattle as his primary form of earning a living. Although men led still a nomadic existence, the first social distinctions arose as well as the first forms of private property. In spite of the lack of stable governments, dependence between groups and the ownership of cattle reinforced inequalities and the authority of families within small social groups, which generally took the form of bands and tribes. In addition, monogamy developed and the accumulation of wealth in the form of cattle broke down the primitive communism of the first stage. Although for some authors such as Millar, the pastoral stage was a peaceful and serene one, for others, such as Kames, it was marked by constant depredation and raids in order to get the best pasturage lands and obtain more cattle[99].

With the invention of agriculture, social development underwent additional changes and proceeded further in its way towards progress. Farming activities gave birth to settled communities, private property of the land, legal codes and evolved government structures. The Scots valued husbandry as a

---

98 Ferguson, *History of Civil Society*, Kames, *Sketches of the History of Man* and Millar, *The Origin of the Distinction of Ranks*. See Fox, Porter and Wokler (eds.), *Inventing Human Science*, Höpfl, 'From Savage to Scotsman', Meek, *Social Science and the Ignoble Savage* and Skinner, 'Natural History', among others.

99 Ferguson, *History of Civil Society*, Kames, *Sketches of the History of Man* and Millar, *The Origin of the Distinction of Ranks*. See Fox, Porter and Wokler (eds.), *Inventing Human Science,* Höpfl, 'From Savage to Scotsman', Meek, *Social Science and the Ignoble Savage* and Skinner, 'Natural History', among others.

remarkable step towards improvement and civility since they linked larger and more complicated social networks to the introduction of agriculture. In agrarian societies, man needed the collaboration of his fellow men and thus sociability and urbanisation thrived. Monogamous marriages were firmly established and chastity upheld by more stable laws. Social interaction at a larger scale helped to refine the manners while increasing prosperity promoted the development of the arts and sciences. However, the Scots were also keen on pointing out the negative outcomes of the introduction of agriculture. Wealth based on the ownership of land increased the authority of great lords, which brought about the violence and insecurity of feudal times. As a result, although agriculture was productive of milder and more refined manners, it also went together with fighting, brutality and an excessive love of honour and military pride[100].

Where the commercial economy prevailed, a different set of social conditions took place. As Adam Smith argued, 'commerce and manufactures gradually introduced order and good government, and with them the liberty and security for individuals, among the inhabitants of the country, who had before lived almost in a continual dependency upon their superiors'[101]. Commercial expansion was productive of wealth, commodities and, accordingly, of better standards of living and leisure which enabled

---

[100] Ferguson, *History of Civil Society*, Kames, *Sketches of the History of Man* and Millar, *The Origin of the Distinction of Ranks*. See Fox, Porter and Wokler (eds.), *Inventing Human Science,* Höpfl, 'From Savage to Scotsman', Meek, *Social Science and the Ignoble Savage* and Skinner, 'Natural History', among others.

[101] Quoted in Skinner, 'Natural History', p. 39.

the perfection of polite sociability and manners, and the progress of the arts and sciences. The division of labour which manufactures required dissolved feudal service relationships while the growth of wealth lessened the authority of the old landed aristocracy, bringing about moderate governments and fairer political, legal and social conditions. Not all the Scots agreed on this diagnose of commercial societies. Some of them, particularly Millar and Ferguson, lamented the great social inequalities and the alienation produced by the division of labour. Although all of the Scots were aware of the negative effects that wealth and its most noxious outcome, luxury, could have on civic virtue and morals, Ferguson stood out among them, pointing out the relative value of each of these stages and expressing deep concerns about the eventual consequences of the commercial stage.

The development of the four stages theory was certainly linked to the development of the natural history of man and its emphasis on regularities and general laws, being therefore firmly rooted in eighteenth century intellectual traditions. However, it is possible to trace its origins back to classical times. In Greco-Roman Antiquity authors such as Plato, Aristotle and, especially, Lucretius reserved an important role for economic activities in their accounts of the evolution and origins of society.

Nevertheless, the foundations of the four stages theory, as it emerged in the eighteenth century, lay in the early modern period, in the work of Grotius and Pufendorf. In their enquiries on the origin of private property, both authors argued that the satisfaction of man's needs led to the first forms of property. Private property,

they remarked, did not emerge all of a sudden encompassing all its possible forms but rather progressed through successive steps. Man's pursuit of his basic needs was productive of new and more complicated ones. The increase of human necessities together with the progressive growth of population determined that private forms of property were successively extended from the possession of the first and primitive tools to cattle and eventually to land and commodities[102].

The ideas of Grotius and Pufendorf were further elaborated by John Locke in his *Two Treatises of Government* (1690) which, in addition, introduced and popularised the thought of both authors in Britain. According to Locke, private property had its origin not in an original pact; it was rather the outcome of man's labour. Ways of earning subsistence entailed the use of things, animals and land, which, as economic activities evolved, needs augmented and population increased, became species of private property, secured by the development of stable and fixed laws[103].

Before being adopted and refined by the Scots as the historical backdrop for their enquiries in the second part of the eighteenth century, the four stages theory was employed and brought into shape by the French enlightened. Turgot used material from travellers' accounts to describe the first stages of human evolution and classified human diversity according to the mode of subsistence. Similarly, Helvetius and Gouget, in their

---

[102] See Emerson, 'Conjectural History and Scottish Philosophers' and Meek, *Social Science and the Ignoble Savage*, chapter 1.

[103] Emerson, 'Conjectural History and Scottish Philosophers' and Meek, *Social Science and the Ignoble Savage*, chapter 1.

works, resorted to the growth of population and needs as the spur to human evolution which was better understood by paying attention to the predominant economic activity of each society[104].

Yet, Rousseau's use of the theory was by far the most influential. In his *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (1755), Rousseau employed a pattern very similar to the four stages theory to explain man's departure from the state of nature. While gathering and hunting were associated with the happiest time in man's evolution, agriculture, division of labour and property in land marked the first steps towards the end of man's blessed primeval stage. As a consequence of the invention of agriculture, man's original equality and community with nature ended, opening the way to the many ills which sprung from commercial societies. However, Rousseau's work did not include the four stages theory in its classic form as it will be developed by the Scots later on. In his account, human evolution was, for the most part, explained by 'accidents' and fortuitous causes and not by the regular pattern of causes of effects which the theory involves. In addition, the successive stages through which man evolved were not clearly linked to different modes of subsistence and although a hunting and agricultural stage were clearly present in the work, there was no reference to a pastoral stage. In fact, only Rousseau's later work, the *Essay on the Origin of Languages*, embodied clearly the four stages theory. However, this book was written and published after the Scots had given birth to the four stages theory in its finest form[105].

---

[104] See Meek, *Social Science and the Ignoble Savage*, chapter 3.

[105] See Meek, *Social Science and the Ignoble Savage*, chapter 3.

Travellers' literature was a main influence on the development of the four stages theory by the Scots. This pattern of social development offered the Scots a conceptual framework within which they could integrate the flood of information brought to Europe by missionaries and travellers. It allowed the conjectural historians to place these primitive societies alongside European modern societies by locating them at both ends of human evolution. While the former were considered the starting point, the latter were viewed as the last part of an elongated pattern of progress. The four stages theory assumed the form of a great guiding principle, or set of principles, with the aid of which the flow of historical and anthropological data could be organised and light thrown on a number of problems concerning mankind's passage from savagery to civility. Most importantly, the four stages theory, with its emphasis on the development of economic techniques and socio-economic relationships, certainly provided an explanatory model which accounted for the rapidity of Scottish current economic progress but still answered for the existing contrast between the economically advancing Lowland areas and the Highlands, which were still in lower stages of development.

In spite of its many antecedents, the four stages theory was clearly one of the main methodological outcomes of Scottish conjectural history. First used in the 1750s by Adam Smith in his lectures in Glasgow and Edinburgh universities, the four stages theory was one of the main pillars of the works of William Robertson, Lord Kames, Adam Ferguson, John Millar and William

Alexander. It is worth to quote Millar extensively in order to have a full view of this theory as conceptualised by the Scots:

> man's first efforts are naturally calculated to increase the means of subsistence, by catching or ensnaring wild animals, or by gathering the spontaneous fruits of the earth; and experience, acquired in the exercise of these employments, is apt, successively, to point out the methods of taming and rearing cattle, and of cultivating the ground. According as men have been successful in these great improvements, and find less difficulty in the attainment of bare necessaries, their prospects are gradually enlarged, their appetites and desires are more and more awakened and called forth in pursuit of the several conveniences of life; and the various branches of manufacture, together with commerce, its inseparable attendant, and with science and literature, the natural offspring of ease and affluence, are introduced, and brought to maturity. By such gradual advances in rendering their situation more comfortable, the most important alterations are produced in the state and condition of a people: their numbers are increased; the connections of society are extended; and men, being less oppressed with their own wants, are more at liberty to cultivate the feelings of humanity: property, the great source of distinction among individuals is established; and the various rights of mankind are protected: the laws of a country are thereby rendered numerous; and a more complex form of government becomes necessary, for distributing justice, and for preventing the disorders which proceed from the jarring interests and passions of a large and opulent community. (…) There is thus, in human society, a natural progress from ignorance to knowledge, and from rude to civilized manners, the several stages of which are usually accompanied with peculiar laws and customs[106].

As this passage points out, the four stages theory, as envisaged by the Scots, was firmly rooted in the principles of natural history. It embodied the natural historical concern with

[106] Millar, *The Origin of the Distinction of Ranks*, p. 176.

general laws and regularities and with facts and empiricism. In addition, the four stages theory allowed the Scots to couple their insistence on human agency as the main drive behind human social evolution with their focus on social conditions and on the law of unintended consequences. Although economic activities stem from human actions and activities, they were also part of the structural workings of society and thus sufficiently detached from the actions of particular individuals.

Similarly, the four stages theory involved a practical application of the Scots' belief on the existence of general causes which helped to explain human evolution, for one of the main tenets supporting this theory was the conviction that similar causes always produced similar effects. The Scottish enlightened rejected traditional explanations in which genetic descent accounted for the similarities between societies separated in time and space. By contrast, the Scots concluded that analogous institutions, customs, manners and legal arrangements were the product of a shared mode of subsistence. By comparing different societies across space and time, the Scots argued that all social groups subsisting on the same main economic activity shared similar features. By this inductive process the Scots assumed that 'the disposition and manners of men are formed by their situation and arise from the state of society in which they live'[107] and therefore, that similar conditions were productive of same social characteristics.

It should be noted the influence of Montesquieu on the development of the four stages theory by the Scots for he had

---

[107] William Robertson, quoted in Meek, *Social Science and the Ignoble Savage*, p. 141.

linked the existence of external causes to the evolution of society. However, the reliance on the four stages pattern stimulated the Scots' criticism of Montesquieu's theories, particularly of his emphasis on climate determinism. The Scottish conjectural historians argued that climate was a factor less important than Montesquieu had thought since climate was something which remained unchanged over time. Yet, the position of nations such as Egypt in the line of human progress had varied enormously over time, even if its climate had remained basically the same through the ages. In addition, although Europe comprised different climatic areas, the progress of the European nations had been very similar. Consequently, changes in the manners of nations were better explained by attending to the variation in their mode of subsistence. As William Robertson argued, 'in every enquiry concerning the operations of men when united together in society, the first object of attention should be their mode of subsistence. According as that varies, their laws and policies must be different'[108].

However, it is important to note that the use by the Scottish conjectural historians of the four stages theory was not dogmatic or mechanical. Their intention was to use it as an organisational framework within which the facts could be usefully placed and not, as sometimes has been argued, as a substitute for the facts. The Scots certainly tried to accommodate the facts to the path established by the four stages theory. However, when the facts seemed to contradict this pattern, the Scots were ready to admit

---

[108] Quoted in Meek, *Social Science and the Ignoble Savage*, p. 140.

that exceptional developments could occur which could not be accounted for by using the theory.

Thus Kames pointed out the exceptionality of American societies in his sketch on the 'Origin and Progress of the American Nations'[109]. He stressed the problems posed by American societies for the use of the four stages theory. He noted that some North American societies had reached some degree of agriculture without passing through the shepherd state. He wondered why the Mexicans and the Peruvians had made great advances towards the perfection of society while the northern tribes were still mostly hunters and fishers. Similarly, he was amazed at the fact that, in spite of living in the torrid zone, the Mexican and Peruvian civilisations had developed highly polished forms of art and state structure whereas in the rest of the world nations living in hot climatic conditions were generally backward and stuck in savagery. The four stages theory could not give an answer to these questions and hence Kames concluded that 'there must be a cause, which on better acquaintance with that people will probably be discovered'[110]. Similarly Alexander remarked that 'the culture of manners (…) does not always proceed upon a uniform plan but is varied, by genius, by necessity, and by a thousand other circumstances'[111].

Although economic factors lay at the core of the four stages theory and played an important role in the thought of the Scottish

---

[109] Kames, *Sketches of the History of Man*, vol. III, pp. 134-186.

[110] Kames, *Sketches of the History of Man*, vol. III, p. 147.

[111] Alexander, *History of Women, I*, p. 297.

authors, a disposition to minimize the significance of other factors or to assign straightforwardly to economic circumstances a causal priority cannot be perceived in their works. Material conditions were considered decisive in particular cases, such as the American indigenous societies, where the roughness of living conditions and the hostility of the natural environment overruled other factors and exerted a powerful influence over almost every aspect of the lives of their inhabitants. In most cases, however, circumstances of different kinds were taken into account on the same footing as economic arrangements. The private lives of men were deemed as influential as their material lives, as proved by the Scottish emphasis on custom, family arrangements and female influence when examining a particular society and assessing its position in the path towards progress.

Unlike clearly materialist approaches such as Marxism, Scottish conjectural history did not underestimate the influence of political as opposed to economic circumstances. Politics often took precedence over economic factors. On account of their decadent despotic governments, Eastern societies were considered to be far below other societies – such as the ancient Germanic nations – on the scale of civility even if the latter had not attained the commercial and manufacturing skills of the former. Indebted to the civic humanist tradition, the Scottish enlightened gave the progress of government a central place in their conjectural histories while attaching a great importance to the development of virtues such as patriotism, republican virtue and civic liberties. Hume valued solid governments highly. Adam Ferguson traced the rise and decline of civic virtues and their relation with economic

prosperity in his *Essay on the History of Civil Society*. In this work, civilisation was understood mainly as political progress; advancement was assessed attending to the development of civic virtues and patriotic bonds between men rather than by paying attention to the development of commerce and the arts. For Ferguson, politics outweighed economics in order to account for the evolution of human societies. Instead of using the four stages theory to organise his query, he preferred to rely on political factors and divided societies into savagery and barbarity according to the absence or presence of private property and an ordered political structure. Kames, on his part, included 'A General View of Government', 'Different Forms of Government Compared', and 'Progress of States from Small to Great', among others, within his *Sketches of the History of Man*[112].

The Scottish insistence on focusing on the economic sphere of human activities, far from being a statement of the primacy of the economic forces over human life, was rather part of an effort to integrate the notion of a universal human nature within the workings of society. According to the pragmatic view of the Scots, the satisfaction of needs and passions were driving forces inherent to human nature. The Scots were not prone to consider man a single-sided entity; they were rather inclined to see the human being as a versatile, many-faceted entity which could not be understood in its full complexity neither by declaring his inherent and natural benevolence, in Rousseau's manner, nor by asserting

[112] See Höpfl, 'From Savage to Scotsman', Ferguson, *History of Civil Society* and Kames, *Sketches of the History of Man*.

his basic deceitful quality, as Hobbes did[113]. In Kames's words, 'man in fact is a complex being, composed of principles, some benevolent, some selfish: and these principles are so justly blended in his nature as to fit him for acting a proper part in society'[114]. The Scots, although firmly convinced of man's benign potential, refused to believe that man would always naively act generously without any spur to it since, although human nature was 'formed for everything that is good and great'[115], it was also determined by appetites and interests. Ferguson argued that 'we must offer some motive of interest, or some hopes of external advantage, to animate the pursuits or to direct the measures of ordinary men'[116]. As Hume remarked, 'ambition, avarice, self-love, vanity, friendship, generosity, public spirit: these passions mixed in various degrees, and distributed through society, have been from the beginning of the world and still are, the sources of all actions and enterprises which have ever been observed among mankind'[117]. Therefore, man's achievement of the basic needs should be taken into account when dealing with human nature because their satisfaction stood chiefly within man's basic interests. Wealth and riches should also be carefully considered, as the

---

113 For a criticism of both views, see Gregory, *A Comparative View*, vol. I, p. 5.

114 Kames, 'Of the Progress of the Female Sex', p. 29.

115 Gregory, *A Comparative View*, vol. I, p. 5.

116 Ferguson, *History of Civil Society*, p. 137.

117 Quoted in Höpfl, 'From Savage to Scotsman', p. 34.

appetite for material goods and status were among the most powerful passions of human nature[118].

The Attack on the Contractualist Tradition.

Given the insistence on empirical observation and the dismissal of speculations about human nature, it is not surprising that the conjectural historians rejected openly the contractualist tradition. The state of nature theorised by Rousseau appeared in the eyes of the Scots as a 'philosophical fiction', to quote Hume's words, a purely hypothetical invention, built through deductive thinking upon a preconceived notion of human nature. Rousseau's state of nature showed none of the emphasis on empirical observation and facts the Scots strived for and hence it became the object of their contempt. They believed that Rousseau's account of the 'natural man' was based on mere speculation and, accordingly, it was regarded as the product of 'fruitless enquiries' and 'wild suppositions'[119]. When dealing with the first social stages of humankind, Rousseau's explicit desire of putting the facts aside was opposed to the approach of the Scots. Regarding Rousseau's point of view as unscientific, they grounded their descriptions of primitive societies on materials from travellers' accounts and endowed their enquiries with a quasi anthropological aim[120].

---

[118] See John Dwyer, *The Age of the Passions. An Interpretation of Adam Smith and the Scottish Enlightenment* (East Lothian, 1998), Höpfl, 'From Savage to Scotsman', Istvan Hont and Michael Ignatieff (eds.), *Wealth and Virtue. The Shaping of Political Economy in the Scottish Enlightenment* (Cambridge, 1983) and Wokler, 'Anthropology and Conjectural History'.

[119] Adam Ferguson, quoted in Carrithers, 'Enlightenment Science of Society'.

[120] See Carrithers, 'Enlightenment Science of Society'.

Yet, the Scots' quarrel with Rousseau was not exclusively rooted in methodological divergences. Their views on society and human nature were often dissimilar and even contradictory. The Scottish philosophers believed that human nature could not be understood without taking social formations into account. There was not an initial asocial stage since the appetite for society was deeply embedded in human nature itself. Man, even in his most primitive state did not act alone, he was always found in troops or companies, as Ferguson remarked. Mankind was naturally endowed with love of society and with social appetites which, even in the most extreme rudeness, led to attachments between individuals. In addition, while in Rousseau's thought independence and individualism formed the core of man's unspoiled human nature and art and culture were rejected as the cause of the decline of man's original virtues, for the Scots it was quite the contrary. Arts, science and the finest products of culture were, like sociability, natural to man and the source of the greatest pleasure man could achieve[121].

The study of society and human nature, besides, should be coupled with the study of human nature, since human nature did not exist in a purer form in an abstract state of nature, as it was Rousseau's belief. The Scots believed that man had a progressive nature and hence, as Ferguson argued, 'if we admit that man is susceptible of improvement and has in himself a principle of progression, and a desire of perfection, it appears improper to say

---

[121] See Carrithers, 'Enlightenment Science of Society' and Wokler, 'Anthropology and Conjectural History'.

that he has quitted the state of his nature, when he has begun to proceed'[122].

In addition, in Rousseau's point of view, society modified and destroyed man's original traits. For him the worse outcome of man's path towards social arrangements was his loss of individuality to live outside himself, drawing his identity from others and finding his self-esteem only through reputation. The point of view of the Scottish enlightened could not be more dissimilar. Life in society allowed men to reach the finest outcome of their potentialities, which could only be developed through sociability. For the Scots, society was not only a spur to the expansion of man's capacities but also a necessary precondition for morality. Thinkers such as Adam Smith argued that the opinion of the others stimulated moral behaviour by forcing men to regard the consequences of their actions beyond their sole profit. The rule of opinion was not, therefore, a constraint for the fulfilment of the individual but rather a precondition for a well-regulated and moral community existence[123].

The Scottish philosophers rejected Rousseau's basic pessimism regarding contemporary societies. According to him, the path from the state of nature to commercial society was marked by the deformation of the positive qualities inherent to man and by the corruption of the happy individualism of the 'natural man'. As men formed society, Rousseau argued, they moved from mutual love and appreciation for each other to

---

[122] Ferguson, *History of Civil Society*, p. 8.

[123] See Dwyer, *The Age of the Passions*, Hont and Ignatieff (eds.), *Wealth and Virtue*and Wokler, 'Anthropology and Conjectural History'.

calculating cooperation and eventually to unscrupulous usage of one another. For the Scots the history of civility was quite the reverse. Even for those, such as John Gregory or Adam Ferguson, who were ready to point out the virtues of the primitive stages of man, social evolution was undoubtedly for the best. It was marked by the enlargement of man's natural social appetites and benevolent feelings; it was a process which eventually produced a higher degree of prosperity, due to economic cooperation, and the development of the most elevated faculties of man, those of the mind, thanks to the birth of the arts and the sciences[124].

However, the Scottish Enlightenment's relation with Rousseau was not marked by total rejection. The Scots found Rousseau's work highly inspirational and often engaged in a vivid discussion of his ideas. Regardless of their many disagreements, the Scottish theorists of human nature considered Rousseau a respectable interlocutor within the current debate on human nature and, hence, many of the French's ideas permeated the Scottish enlightened philosophy. Even if he had reached opposite conclusions regarding human nature, the influence of culture, and the role of the social contract in the formation of societies, Rousseau's *Discourse on Inequality* was considered by many Scottish authors a valuable work of natural history. The book shared many of the methodological features employed by the Scots, such as the use of the four stages theory, and, like most of the Scottish accounts of the evolution of society, traced the progress of the human species from rudeness to refinement – although rudeness

[124] Ferguson, *History of Civil Society* and Gregory, *A Comparative View*.

and refinement were words which, in Rousseau's thought, had different implications[125].

The Scots often echoed Rousseau's pessimistic view of civilisation when they pointed out the dangers inherent to commercial societies. Although undoubtedly committed to progress, the authors of the Scottish Enlightenment were neither keen to subscribe to a simplistic view of human advancement nor eager to assume that man's progressive tendencies would ensure a free from danger and ever-lasting period of happiness embodied by the commercial stage currently achieved in Europe. Even the most convinced supporters of its benefits were prone to couple the praise of the improvements brought about by commercial societies with warnings about the threats which endangered such advancements and cast a shadow over further progress. Progress was similar to a coin and each achievement had a potential drawback attached to it. While affluence had certainly raised the standards of living and opened the possibility for the arts and sciences to thrive, it could also easily lead to luxury and, as a result, to corruption, idleness and decline. Similarly, politeness, one of the most precious outcomes of human evolution, could turn into artifice, falsehood and the rule of fashion. In the paragraphs describing the dangers which threatened their contemporary societies we can perceive Rousseau's fatalistic views regarding culture and society permeating the work of the Scots who, in many respects, were so openly opposed to him.

---

125 Fox, Porter and Wokler (eds.), *Inventing Human Science*, Höpfl, 'From Savage to Scotsman' and Skinner, 'Natural History'.

Unsurprisingly, Rousseau's influence was particularly clear among the authors who were reluctant to approve of the features of current commercial societies, such as John Gregory and Adam Ferguson. Rousseau's vision of the corrupting effects brought on man by society was taken up by Gregory in his *A Comparative View of the State and Faculties of Man*, particularly in the introduction. Like Rousseau, Gregory believed that civilised societies corrupted man's instincts, which in the savage state functioned as God had intended. Besides, the civilised state had harmful effects on the mind and the body and, in a fashion which could be characteristic of Rousseau himself, he affirmed that 'the pursuits of commerce are destructive of the health and lives of the human species'. Gregory linked commercial societies to luxury and remarked that 'one of the most certain consequences of a very extended commerce and what is called the most advanced and polished state of society, is a universal passion for riches, which corrupts every sentiment of Taste, Nature and Virtue'. In this state, human nature was reduced to 'the most unhappy sate in which can ever be beheld', 'the constitution both of body and mind becomes sickly and feeble' and 'money becomes the universal idol' to a point that it 'extinguishes or conquers the natural attachment between the sexes'. Children were neglected and considered a burden, patriotism declined and men abandoned themselves to 'dissipation, languor, disgust and misery'. Significantly, Gregory, like Rousseau, admitted that, although it was impossible to combat the negative effects of commerce in society at large, man, individually, could

counteract these evils by cultivating the true principles of reason, virtue, taste and religion[126].

However, in spite of their many similarities, Gregory departed from Rousseau at crucial points. In *A Comparative View of the Faculties of Man* Gregory vindicated instinct as a principle of action. Shared by animals and humans alike, instinct should not be deemed a debased stimulus since 'reason indeed is but a weak principle in Man, in respect of Instinct, and is generally a more unsafe guide'[127]. However, Gregory did not dare to go as far as Rousseau and stressed that, in spite of his basic animality, man is clearly superior and unique, 'the head of the animal creation'[128]. Unlike animals, man was governed by reason and hence was endowed with intellectual powers unknown to animals, which acted solely driven by mechanical forces. Moreover, these intellectual powers, fuelled by civilisation and culture, were the source of the pleasures of human life such as science, the fine arts, religion and life in society. Besides, while animals were guided by blind impulses and by their appetites, men were able to make sense of their actions as a result of rational reflection. Reason and culture were therefore, preferable to instinct and to the 'state of nature'.

In addition, Gregory held that in the savage state, man could not release his full potentiality; only by moving beyond the primitive stage could man exercise the nobler faculties of his mind and his moral sense. The happiest stage of social development was

---

126 Wood, 'Natural History of Man', Wood, 'The Science of Man' and Gregory, *A Comparative View*, vol. I, pp. xv-xvii.

127 Gregory, *A Comparative View*, vol. I, p. 20.

128 Gregory, *A Comparative View*, vol. I, p. 12.

not, as Rousseau contended, the individualistic state of nature but rather a middle point between savagery and civility as exemplified by the poems of *Ossian*. Here, man still retained his instincts, his bodily vigour and animal-like energy while the seeds of refinement had yielded their most positive fruits: warm social affections and disinterested patriotism[129].

Adam Ferguson, for his part, without subscribing to Rousseau's primitivism, found many virtues deserving his praise among primitive and barbarous peoples. In savage societies, individuals were prone to faithful friendships, military pride and patriotic courage and possessed simple manners and affections, qualities which were not always preserved in man's journey from rudeness to civilisation. However, he was not committed to an adamant defence of a stage of rudeness over commercial societies. In spite of their many virtues, primitive peoples were prone to regrettable acts of violence and bloodshed and lacked the enjoyment of the arts and sciences which could only be brought about by commercial societies.

Ferguson echoed Rousseau's anxieties about the disruption of community ties and of the cooperative drive among men in commercial societies. For him, the growth of material conveniences and the spread of luxury endangered civic virtue and the bonds which united society, bringing men to a state more solitary than that of the primitive man. Commercial societies also debilitated the civic virtues which promoted common good by fostering selfish vices and the love of wealth, and restricting the

---

[129] Gregory, *A Comparative View*, vol. I, pp. viii-xiv.

political virtues enjoyed by the republican citizen. However, even if Ferguson was among the most critical of the negative aspects of commercial societies and harshly censured the love of wealth, imperial expansion and the division of labour, he also shared with his Scottish counterparts a distinctive faith on the progressive nature of man and on the benefits arisen from advancement. He believed that sociability and politeness formed the basis of morality and remarked that, even if in commercial societies men were incapable of reaching the high standards of political virtue achieved by the ancient nations, this relative corruption was necessary for the functioning of society and compatible with moral excellence and public virtue. As Ronald Meek has remarked, 'Ferguson, in spite of his serious and profound critique of the evils and vices of commercial nations, is certainly no primitivist. The price of real and continued progress in commercial societies is merely eternal vigilance; and the savage, if not positively ignoble, is by no means as noble as men like Rousseau suggest'[130].

In addition, Ferguson departed from Rousseau at one essential point. While Rousseau was mostly concerned with the fate of the individual in the evolutionary path towards culture and progress, Ferguson's main interest was the preservation of the communal ties and of the social fabric in the face of growing artificiality and wealth. Ferguson's worries were linked to the well-being of society and not, like in Rousseau's case, associated with the preservation of man's individuality within increasing social

[130] Meek, *Social Science and the Ignoble Savage*, p. 155. See also Forbes, 'Introduction' to Ferguson, *History of Civil Society* and Ferguson, *History of Civil Society*.

complexity. For Ferguson, men were mainly political beings whose happiness was inextricably united to the common good, which demanded some sacrifices on the part of the individual[131].

Rousseau's influence was present in Alexander's *History of Women*, particularly in his chapter on the 'Employments and Amusements of Women'. After reviewing female occupations in different societies, and asserting that the care for the offspring and family was the most natural duty of women, Alexander embarked on a critique of contemporary European women. He condemned the fashionable amusements and pastimes of upper class women, which were rooted in idleness and fashion, and, like Gregory, encouraged women to assume the main role in the education of children, disposing of wet nurses and breastfeeding their children. In his defence of maternal breastfeeding, Alexander resorted to his expertise as a physician and followed closely Rousseau's views as expressed in the *Émile*. Like Rousseau, Alexander emphasised the importance of the affectionate bond between mother and child, insisted on the pleasures of breastfeeding for both mother and child, and linked the use of wet nurses with luxury and idleness[132].

However, although Rousseau remained an important influence for Alexander when dealing with women's role in family life and the principles of domesticity, Alexander rejected Rousseau's primitivism and his claims to an unspoiled and remote state of nature. Primitive peoples, according to Alexander's account, did not live in happiness and abundance; their existence

131 Ferguson, *History of Civil Society*.

132 See Alexander, *History of Women, I*, pp. 136-148 and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, (1762) *Émile* (London, 2000).

was marked by endless toil and misery. The inconveniences of savage life were even more acute for women; in primitive societies they were subjected to the tyrannical power of their husbands who, divested of tender affections for their female companions, reduced women to slavery and perpetual drudgery. In fact, Alexander explicitly rejected Rousseau's longing for a past golden age of humankind when he remarked that 'such, among many, is the partiality of admiring whatever is past, and despising whatever is present, that every thing stamped with the rust of remote antiquity must infallibly be good and virtuous, and every thing of a modern date is unquestionably insignificant and vicious'[133]. When considering women's situation, Alexander believed, there was no happy state of nature to look back on, nor better situation than that achieved in the polite countries of current Europe.

The Normative Side of Conjectural History

In spite of the natural historical emphasis on objectivity, empiricism and the primacy of sound methodology over first premises and theory, several authors have pointed out the normative side of natural history. As Roy Porter has argued, the conjectural insistence on order and method could be used to back a political agenda. For many, the ordered world revealed by natural history should have its counterpart in historical reality. Many authors believed that the harmonious workings revealed by natural history should be mirrored by society, and therefore supported social and political stability while condemning radical change. Just

[133] Alexander, *History of Women, I*, pp. 467-68.

as the human and natural world was governed by solid and constant laws, human societies should abide to firm governments and stable legal systems. In addition, the hierarchy of social stages uncovered by the four stages theory was echoed by the defence of a fixed and stable social division which protected the ruling orders from the threat of rebellion of the nascent working classes[134].

The four stages theory added an extra value on certain socioeconomic institutions and processes which were currently under attack. The four stages model vindicated inequality, private property and the accumulation of capital as key features of man's path towards progress in a moment in which the ferment which preceded the French Revolution had encouraged claims to social and economic equality[135].

Other authors considered change and progression as the defining traits of human evolution, as revealed by the enquiry on man. Natural history could therefore be used to sustain more radical and revolutionary claims such as attacks on the division of labour as in Ferguson's and Millar's case.

The connexion between social reality and intellectual developments was particularly clear in the case of the Scottish Enlightenment. As we have seen, in the eighteenth century Scotland was a nation divided between the thriving and polished Lowlands and the economically and culturally backward Highlands[136]. By decidedly advocating civilisation and progress the

---

134 Porter, 'Medical Science and Human Science'.

135 Meek, *Social Science and the Ignoble Savage*, p. 129.

136 On this topic, see chapter 2 of this PhD thesis.

Scots were certainly pushing for a reform of the social structure, laws and culture of the Highlanders and implicitly approving of British drastic measures to transform the area. As Höpfl has remarked, 'a conjectural history illustrating the nature or rather the necessary course of advancement from rudeness to polish could serve as implicit justification for the sufferings of the rude and barbarous Highlanders, as necessary concomitants of "advancement"'[137]. Quite significantly, the exception to this frame of mind, Adam Ferguson, was the only Highlander and Gaelic speaker among the group.

The Scottish inherent support for the reform of the Highlands was deeply rooted in the fundamental tenets of conjectural history. Conjectural historians were convinced that their intellectual speculations were grounded on their social utility. Although most of them were certainly engaged in their enquiries by their profound sense of curiosity and fondness for scholarly knowledge, the improvement of human condition was a fundamental part of the conjectural aim. Empirical knowledge of human nature, replacing superstition, ignorance and dogma, was advocated as the foundation of improvement and progress. Just as the progress of science had been followed by the trail of technological advancements which prepared the industrial revolution, the analysis of the nature and capabilities of man would result on a similar improvement of society and men's lives. The exploration of human nature and social evolution, it was believed, would provide a clear insight into the features of actual societies

[137] Höpfl, 'From Savage to Scotsman', p. 29.

which could therefore be reformed and evaluated in a rational and critical light.

However, this critical evaluation had a moral bias. As Hume put it 'the end of all moral speculations is to teach us our duty'[138]. Accordingly, conjectural narratives often resorted to past episodes with a view to illustrating some general proposition concerning the goodness or badness of certain features of human behaviour or social arrangements. This was particularly clear in Rousseau's case, since his state of nature, rather than reflecting a historical period, was thought to exhibit humankind in its essential and happier state and thus was used to establish judgements about what was right or wrong. Although Scottish conjectural history was plagued with warnings about the current course of progress and even if certain authors, such as Adam Ferguson, were certainly keen on pointing out the evils related to commercial societies, more often than not Scottish conjectural histories were designed to celebrate the present state of European societies as compared with the different degrees of barbarity and rudeness of the past and of contemporary non-European nations.

The moralistic bias of the conjectural project was partly inherited from the discourse on human nature. Human nature was generally addressed to ground a moralistic argument – whether of a Christian or a secular variety. The universal notion of human nature proposed by natural historians and the Scots was used as the foundation of morality and as the basis upon which moral standards of universal validity were erected. In the Scottish case,

---

[138] Quoted in Höpfl, 'From Savage to Scotsman', p. 21.

these claims were further strengthened by the role played by God as the designer of human nature. Knowledge about human nature became the knowledge of what was possible and right to do and of what should be condemned[139].

Moreover, references to human nature were normally accompanied by certain moral value conferred on it. On the one hand, human nature could be composed of a set of qualities and practices that should be preserved or regained in a world dominated by artificiality, as in Rousseau's case. On the other hand, human nature could be a starting point that should be polished and brought to perfection by the action of culture. There was rarely a descriptive account of human nature. In spite of claims to objectivity and impartiality, in these narratives there was not a fundamental separation between the evaluative and descriptive aspects of the discourse[140].

Alexander, for instance, used the discourse of human nature to argue that modesty, chastity and maternal instinct were fundamental parts of a feminine essence which should be respected. As a result, an ideal of femininity which stressed the maternal and domestic role of women and the basic difference between the active qualities of men and the delicate and vulnerable nature of women was recommended and enforced. By grounding his arguments on the discourse of human nature, Alexander was able to endow his conjectural account of women's evolution with a prescriptive undertone. Similarly, the Scottish enlightened resorted

---

139 Smith, 'The Language of Human Nature'.

140 Smith, 'The Language of Human Nature'.

to the social principle rooted in man's nature to support solid governments and state power in a moment in which European states increased their sway over their subjects through administrative, legal and financial reforms.

THE *HISTORY OF WOMEN* AND THE WRITING OF CONJECTURAL HISTORY

Alexander's work should be considered in the light of contemporary historiographical developments. In seventeenth and eighteenth century Europe, history grew in popularity, especially among the wealthy classes and the professions from which Alexander came[141]. An increasing number of historical and antiquarian works were published and different institutions aimed at promoting historical knowledge were created. Being versed in history became a mark of polite education because it denoted knowledge of the classics and familiarity with a wide range of sources. In eighteenth century Scottish universities history was increasingly taught, generally as part of the curriculum of classical disciplines, such as moral philosophy, Latin, Greek, mathematics and medicine.

It was not unorthodox to publish a book on the history of women, as was the case of Alexander, since the reading of history was also viewed as a polite accomplishment. The discourse of sensibility brought about new forms of reading history, bringing it closer to women, who had the sensibility required to attain the

[141] Emerson, 'Conjectural History and Scottish Philosophers'.

empathic engagement with the past which authors such as Kames praised as the finest outcome of history. Since it dealt primarily with customs and manners, conjectural history was regarded particularly appropriate for women, who were not suited for the study of politics. History was accepted and encouraged as part of female education in order to develop their moral faculties as well as providing lessons on human nature and the workings of God[142]. By contrast, Mary Wollstonecraft and Elizabeth Hamilton regarded history as a means of improving women's rationality[143].

One of the most significant historiographical achievements of the eighteenth century was the development of what came to be known as conjectural history, which flourished in the background of the Scottish Enlightenment. William Alexander's *History of Women* followed closely the characteristics of Scottish conjectural history, whose main representatives, Millar and Kames, were also primary sources for the book. Like them, Alexander expressed his desire to ground his enquiry on impartiality and adopted a critical approach to the sources he used[144]. He shared with them sources, a focus on long-term historical processes of a non-political nature, the use of the four stages theory as an explanatory model, and the intermingling of female progress with the general advancement of society. Whereas in Kames's and Millar's works the condition of women was a part of a general account of civilisation, the *History of Women* deepened the conjectural emphasis on women by turning

---

142 See John Gregory, (1774 ed.) *A Father's Legacy to his Daughters* (New York & London, 1974).

143 On this topic, see chapter 5 of this PhD thesis.

144 See Kames, 'Of the Progress of the Female Sex', p. 4-5.

their improvement and manners into the main theme through which the progress of mankind was traced.

Main Sources and Influences

As we have seen, Scottish conjectural history was deeply indebted to the development of natural history and the success and prestige of scientific knowledge. However, Scottish conjectural history, as Emerson has argued, was also rooted in former traditions of historical writing such as the Bible, classical works and current philosophical and scholarly trends[145]. Alexander used the Bible extensively, especially for the evolution of the condition of women in the times of the patriarchs and in the civilisations mentioned in the Old Testament (namely, Egypt, Assyria, and Babylonia). The Bible provided ideas and ways of looking at history in tune with the most distinguishing traits of conjectural history. The Book of Genesis had a stadial progression similar to the four stages theory. The history of Ancient Israel was narrated through circles of growing luxury followed by religious and moral corruption which matched Scottish concerns about the moral dangers of wealth. However, Alexander, like the conjectural historians, adopted a critical attitude regarding the Bible. He used it as a historical text rather than as a source of transcendental truth; he emphasised its metaphorical nature and placed it on an equal footing with other materials he drew upon. In the *History of Women*, the Gospel remained a sacred book and was, thus, seldom cited, only to convey moral maxims. By contrast, the sanctity of the Old

[145] Emerson, 'Conjectural History and Scottish Philosophers' p. 66.

Testament was undermined by his critical remarks about the morality of the patriarchs.

The works of the authors of Antiquity were among the principal sources for Alexander, who regularly quoted Plutarch, Herodotus, Homer, Tacitus or Julius Caesar. Through the reading of both classical authors and renaissance humanists, the classical tradition became one of the main influences of conjectural historians. It provided descriptions of the Graeco-Roman and Germanic past; it also offered theories of social progress[146] and works devoted to women (namely Plutarch's *Mulierum virtutes*). In addition, eighteenth century learned culture was characterised by an appreciation of classical societies and a deep knowledge of their culture and history. Rome and Athens were considered key points of reference in the history of mankind and, in a certain way, the main examples of past human achievements. However, since classical civilisations were also deemed 'the product of developments possible in all or most cultures'[147], its feats could be equated by other societies and even surpassed by current nations.

The association of savage societies and children with the natural world was the product of another influential discourse, primitive naturalism, whose main representative was Rousseau. In his *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality* (1755), Rousseau relied on the naturalist tradition to outline human evolution from a state of rude

---

[146] Lucretius and Diodorus Siculus developed theories of social progress similar to the pattern used by the conjectural historians, who were well acquainted with both authors. See Emerson, 'Conjectural History and Scottish Philosophers', pp. 69-70.

[147] Emerson, 'Conjectural History and Scottish Philosophers', p. 70.

simplicity to corrupt refinement. In his account, earliest societies were closer to nature and, therefore, more virtuous since nature in Rousseau's thought was a positive notion. He identified nature with God's designs and remarked that following nature, human beings will follow God's will. Nature was also a state of innate purity and innocence, unspoilt in primitive societies by the corrupting artificiality of culture and, in children, by the harms of a mistaken education. The identification of children with nature and innocence was made explicit by Rousseau in his book *Émile* (1762) in which he recommended a non-intrusive method of education, following the instinctive tendencies of the child, and emphasised the role of the mother in the first stages of education. In Scotland, Rousseau's primitivism and naturalism was echoed by John Gregory's *A Comparative View of the State and Faculties of Man with Those of the Animal World* (1774) and by Gilbert Stuart's *A View of Society in Europe in Its Progress from Rudeness to Refinement* (1778). Both authors shared Rousseau's pessimism regarding current progress and identified a 'golden age' in the past. As opposed to the current corruption of manners by luxury and refinement, they longed for the simple, virtuous and manly manners of the German tribes and the Scottish past, as described in Tacitus's *Germania* and in *Ossian* poems, respectively[148].

Gilbert Stuart was the main representative of a Scottish historical narrative different from the conjectural histories of

[148] See Rousseau, *Émile*, Gregory, *A Comparative View* and Gilbert Stuart, (1778 ed.) *A View of Society in Europe, in its Progress from Rudeness to Refinement* (Bristol, 1995). See also Emerson, 'Conjectural History and Scottish Philosophers' and J. C. Stewart-Robertson, 'The Well-Principled Savage or the Child of the Scottish Enlightenment', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 42, (1981).

Millar, Kames and Robertson, which equated German nations to savage societies in their mistreatment of women[149]. Their divergences were grounded in their positions regarding national identity and also in their dissimilar status among the Scottish cultural elite. In Stuart's writings the position of women was used to support an idea of nation rooted in the past whereas conjectural historians, like Alexander, looked at the union with England and to contemporary commercial societies to define their national project. Robertson, Kames and Millar, unlike Stuart, had achieved an institutional position in Scottish cultural life. However, the deep impact and popularisation of the poems of *Ossian* and the appraisal of the nation's past intrinsic to any nationalistic project determined that even these historians acknowledged the distinctiveness of Scottish and Anglo-Saxon past which was used to ground current progress and suggest the superiority of Britain among other nations[150].

Accordingly, although in some sections the *History of Women* was clearly indebted to Stuart[151], Alexander's praise of Germanic nations was less emphatic. He celebrated principally women, whereas his depiction of German men was less favourable. Apart

---

149 See, for instance, Millar, *The Origin of the Distinction of Ranks*, pp. 188, 190, 195-96.

150 Stuart, *A View of Society in Europe*. On these issues see Jane Rendall, 'Clio, Mars and Minerva: the Scottish Enlightenment and the Writing of Women's History', in T. M. Devine and J. R. Young (eds.), *Eighteenth Century Scotland. New Perspectives.* (East Linton, 1999), pp. 134-151 and Jane Rendall, 'Tacitus Engendered: "Gothic Feminism" and British Histories, c. 1750-1800', in Geoffrey Cubitt (ed.), *Imagining Nations* (Manchester & New York, 1998), pp. 57-74.

151 See Alexander, *History of Women, II*, p. 361.

from their attachment to women, they were still very rude and prone to violence. The German past, therefore, was not a 'golden age' to recover, as it was in Stuart's account. In addition, Stuart deemed private property and the development of commerce the source of present corruption and the cause of the decline of the unparalleled advantageous condition which women had enjoyed in German societies. By contrast, Alexander, like Kames and Millar, considered that a better situation for women was yet to come.

When dealing with his contemporary primitive societies and, especially, the Eastern nations, Alexander, like the conjectural historians, was highly indebted to the discourse of Orientalism. This discourse was institutionalised in the eighteenth century by canonical texts and institutions. As Said remarked, it consisted of a limited set of images, ideas, and representations, through which the East was conceived as an uncivilised and morally inferior 'other'[152] . The Orient was a timeless place, unaffected by progress, whose main characteristics were despotic political rule, unrestrained passions and luxurious material conditions. However, feminist scholars have stressed the relevance of gender to the understanding of the structure of Orientalism and its basic representations[153]. Western discourses of sexual and oriental

---

[152] See Said, *Orientalismo*.

[153] See, for instance, Joanna de Groot, '"Sex" and "Race"; the Formation of Language and Image in the Nineteenth Century', in Susan Mendus and Jane Rendall (eds.), *Sexuality and Subordination* (London, 1989), pp. 89-128, pp. 89-128, Reina Lewis, *Gendering the Exotic. Race, Femininity and Representation* (London & New York, 1996), Lisa Lowe, *Critical Terrains. French and British Orientalisms* (Ithaca & London, 1991), Billie Melman, *Woman's Orients: English Women and the Middle East, 1718-1918* (London, 1995), Felicity A. Nussbaum, *Torrid Zones. Maternity, Sexuality and Empire in Eighteenth Century English Narratives* (Baltimore & London, 1995).

difference were structurally similar: women and the East were conceptualised as the 'other', as objects of knowledge, dependent, inferior and incapable of fully reasoning capacities. Both discourses were constructed in order to secure western/male identities and without revealing any truth about women/East. The typical images and representations used in these discourses were very similar and often interchangeable: lack of restraint, sensuality and irrationality. Quite significantly, effeminacy was considered to be one of the main traits of the inhabitants of the East.

The History of Women as a Work of Natural History

The discourse of natural history was particularly influential for William Alexander. Science and its principles were certainly respected by and familiar to a man who had been trained and earned his living as a physician. His fondness for the principles of science and natural history lie underneath his self-definition as an 'impartial observer of human nature'[154] in the first volume of his work. In addition, science and natural history were particularly suitable for the task he embarked on when writing the *History of Women*. Like the conjectural and natural historians, Alexander wanted to move on from past traditions of historical writing. Natural history, with its emphasis on novelty and open horizons of enquiry, certainly provided Alexander with the necessary intellectual tools for his enquiry.

Alexander opened the book with a rejection of the two traditional ways in which women had figured as historical subjects:

---

[154] Alexander, *History of Women, I*, p. 347.

the blind condemnation and the exalted praise of women. Women had been a recurrent object of derision and sharp criticism. Women, Alexander argued, were in all times and civilisations 'the subject upon which satirists had discharged their wit, and splenetics their ill-humour'[155]. Writers, dating back to Salomon and the Greek and Roman Antiquity, had been keen on cruelly exposing the vices and foibles of women and on sneering at their persons, behaviour and constitution. This tradition, moreover, was characteristic not only of the western intellectual tradition but could also be found in the East, where women were supposed to be 'entirely divested of every good quality of the mind'[156]. Moreover, this tradition had encouraged injurious ideas and opinions about women which ended up rooted in society, such as the belief on the innate wickedness of women and on the inferiority of their souls[157]. Alexander criticised bitterly this way of writing about women on the grounds that it was unjust and had no respect for truth and empirical facts. He even contended that these writers should have dark and personal motives, such as a romantic disappointment, to go against women in such a harsh way[158].

However, Alexander was not fond of the opposite tradition, that of writing in favour of the sex. He noted that together with the spread of the chivalric ideal in medieval Europe, it became fashionable to praise women as superior and adorable beings

---

155 Alexander, *History of Women, I*, p. viii.

156 Alexander, *History of Women, I*, p. vi.

157 See Alexander, *History of Women, II*, pp. 61-68.

158 See Alexander, *History of Women, I*, p. v and Alexander, *History of Women, II*, p. 66.

which deserved unquestionable praise. He also disapproved of this tradition, which left aside truth to embark on the most extravagant and misplaced eulogies of female qualities. Alexander lamented that, 'not satisfied with comparing their mistresses to angels and other inferior celestial beings; they were not ashamed to compare them to, and even to exalt them above, the Supreme Being himself'[159]. As this quote emphasises, personal reasons and not a search for truth were often behind such a passionate praise of women.

Both traditions were implicitly linked by Alexander to the way women had been traditionally looked at and treated by men. Partiality and prejudice stemmed from man's dealings with the other sex:

> although there is nothing on nature that so much engages our attention, or so forcibly draws our inclinations, as the other sex, yet so strong is our partiality to ourselves, that we have never in any period, nor in any country, sufficiently attended to the happiness and interest of those beings, whom in every period, and in every country, we have professed to love and to adore: And while the charms which they possess have every where extorted from us the tribute of love, they have only in a few places so far softened the ferocity of our nature, as to obtain from us good usage[160].

Alexander's task was thus to reach a middle point between both traditions and, guided by impartial reasoning and observation, draw an exact account of women's historical experience which comprised both its negative and positive aspects. Accordingly he

[159] Alexander, *History of Women, I*, p. ix.

[160] Alexander, *History of Women, I*, p. i.

remarked that 'we write the history of women, not their panegyric. Truth, therefore, still obliges us to exhibit to view characters hardly more amiable or engaging than those we have already drawn'[161].

Alexander rejected former traditions of writing about women and expressed his determination to follow the scientific focus on accuracy and objectivity, dealing with the subject of his enquiry in a 'calm and dispassionate light'[162]. In tune with the imperatives of natural history, prejudice should be left aside and replaced by careful observation and reliable facts. Alexander's aim in his *History of Women* was thus, to overcome past models and integrate women's history as an essential branch of the analysis of human nature and the evolution of society.

Nevertheless, a fair and unbiased spirit of enquiry was coupled with a concern with reform and improvement of women's condition. On this account, Alexander preferred the tradition of women's worthies to its negative counterpart because 'the praises bestowed on women in former times, fired them with a great and a virtuous emulation; the satire thrown out against them by the writers we have mentioned, only excited their indignation, but did not amend their heart'[163]. Underneath the quest for a coherent and informed account of the evolution of women's situation across time and space, it laid a decided effort to reform women's behaviour, education and manners and to procure an improvement of women's place in current society. The peculiar mixture of

---

161 Alexander, *History of Women, I*, p. 361.

162 Alexander, *History of Women, I*, p. xii.

163 Alexander, *History of Women, I*, p. xiv.

prescription and objectivity which characterised Alexander's book and his rejection of former traditions of writing about women were summed up in the following paragraph:

> as impartial historians, we hold not up the fair side of the picture only, but shall turn to the other also. This less lovely side, however, we shall present to our female readers, without any of the sourness of the declaimer, or the sarcastical sneering of the satirist; being fully sensible, especially when we address ourselves to the softer sex, that a reproof is half lost, where ill-nature is joined; and having only in view the improvement of their understandings, and leading them by gentle arts to those paths of rectitude and decorum, from which some of them have deviated[164].

Alexander's *History of Women* reflected the natural historian's concern with nature. Like most Scottish conjectural historians, Alexander employed the notion of nature in close relation with its most direct counterpart, culture. In the *History of Women* the relation between culture and nature was articulated in two different ways. Nature could be identified as the original traits pertaining to mankind, which could be perceived more clearly by attending to the lives of men in savage societies. Man, Alexander believed, had been endowed by God with certain qualities and dispositions of mind which could be better identified by looking at mankind's existence in its rudest form and by comparing man's behaviour with that of animals. In this sense, Alexander's notion of nature was close to Gregory's notion of instinct. It referred to mankind's purest essence unspoiled by the artificiality of culture. Accordingly, Alexander, like Gregory, resorted to comparisons with the animal

[164] Alexander, *History of Women, I*, pp. 464-65.

kingdom in order to tell the difference between 'natural' – that is, advantageous – habits and 'unnatural' practices, introduced by nature and prejudicial for human life.

In his exploration of the foundations of human virtues and customs, he often looked for their natural origin in order to prove their righteousness[165]. In this way, Alexander argued that the first and most important duty of women should be the care of the offspring which, although neglected in current European societies due to the imperatives of fashion and artifice, was strongly rooted in women's essence. In this respect, Alexander remarked that 'the most tender care and anxious solicitude for their infant offspring, is an innate idea throughout the wide extent of the animal creation, much more strongly imprinted on the minds of females than of males'[166]. Like Gregory, Alexander argued that this innate principle was often weakened and destroyed by man's progress towards civility:

> a moderate attention to the nature and œconomy of the brute animals will convince us that the care of their young arises from this innate principle, and is not the effect of reasoning; but we shall be still more convinced of this, if we attentively consider the females of the human genus, in savage and civil life; a consideration which will uniformly point out to us that his innate care and anxious solicitude, diminish gradually in proportion as women advance more toward perfection or rather imperfection of politeness[167].

---

165 This was especially remarkable in Kames's case. See Kames, 'Of the Progress of the Female Sex'.

166 Alexander, *History of Women, I*, p. 136.

167 Alexander, *History of Women, I*, p. 136-37.

Similarly, when dealing with the causes of ill-treatment of women and of the beliefs on the inferiority of women, Alexander used the comparative method with the animal kingdom to prove that man's sense of superiority over the opposite sex was the product of artificiality and culture and not emanated from human nature: 'this mode of treating the females of our species is a singularity of behaviour peculiar to man, and has not originated from any thing he could observe around him; for the males of the brute animals do not, so far as we can discover, ever pretend to govern direct, or dispose of their females'[168].

We should note that in Alexander's account the notion of nature as something essentially good but frail, subject to the corruption of culture was generally linked to a normative bias. The connexion between prescription and this usage of the idea of nature has been already acknowledged in Gregory's case. Like him, Alexander resorted to the idea of nature as an infallible guide and to comparisons between man and animals in order to back his defence of specific practices, such as mother's involvement in child's education and breastfeeding, and to condemn current customs, such as the belief on women's inferiority.

Nevertheless, in the *History of Women*, nature could also be conceptualised in a different form. Like Kames, Millar and eventually Gregory, Alexander rejected Rousseau's natural primitivism and associated nature with primitive societies, remarkable for their cruelty and rudeness. The notion of nature was thus linked to man's appetites and animal tendencies which

168 Alexander, *History of Women, II*, p. 47.

should be restrained and polished by culture rather than protected from the influence of civilisation. Accordingly, Alexander agreed with his Scottish counterparts in preferring civilised societies to the 'state of nature' as exemplified by the savagery of primitive tribes and nations.

However, a third approach to the relationship between culture and nature prevailed in Alexander's book, an approach which sought to mediate these conflicting conceptualisations of nature. Like most of the Scottish conjectural historians, Alexander found difficult to stand unambiguously on any of the sides of the nature/culture divide. Although Alexander was undoubtedly an advocate of progress and civilisation, he also remarked frequently that culture could easily corrupt many of the simple, 'natural' qualities conferred to man by God. Too much culture, in short, was productive of the ills of artificiality and luxury which Alexander was keen to condemn in societies, like France, which had overstepped the boundaries of refinement. However, unadorned nature and simplicity, as proved by the American societies, were associated with barbarism and savagery and with the worse qualities of man's essence set free. Proper civility was a middle point between nature and culture, between rudimentary simplicity and excessive artificiality.

Therefore, Alexander, like most of the Scottish authors, sought a middle point between nature and culture in which culture served as a protection of the positive side of nature, and as a spur for the development of man's natural qualities. Although for Alexander human virtues were certainly natural, they had been implanted in our consciousness in their potentiality and required

the stimulus of culture to fully develop and reach their finest form. This was the case of modesty and delicacy. Regarding modesty, Alexander remarked that 'in the most rude and savage states of mankind, however, this virtue has no existence: In those where politeness and the various refinements connected with it are carried to excess, it is discarded, as a vulgar and unfashionable restraint on the freedom of good breeding'[169]. Similarly, Alexander argued that although the seeds of decency were early implanted in the female mind, 'in the human genus these seeds require some culture to expand, and bring them to perfection; whereas, on the other hand, too much culture actually destroys them altogether'[170].

One of the main features that connected Alexander with contemporary Scottish conjectural historians was his use of the four stages theory, which provided him with the historical backdrop for his enquiry. The importance of the four stages theory for the *History of Women* is not evident since Alexander chose to arrange the contents of the book in chapters which were devoted to different topics rather than reflecting a socioeconomic scheme of human development. Thus the book included chapters on 'Female education', the 'Employments and Amusements of Women', 'Delicacy and Chastity', 'Dress and Ornaments', 'Marriage' and 'Courtship' among many others. This feature of the book resembles the rambling and irregular structure of Kames's *Sketches of the History of Man*, which was a clear influence over Alexander's work, since each one of the chapters, like Kames's

169 Alexander, *History of Women, II*, p. 1.

170 Alexander, *History of Women, II*, p. 7.

sketches, formed a unit of its own and was followed by the next one with no apparent organisational reason. However, Alexander, for the 'sake of method and regularity' divided internally each thematic unit according to the four stages theory. The socioeconomic steps of the four stages theory certainly provided the backbone of the book since each chapter was arranged by examining the situation of women in each subsequent stage of human development. Thus, each chapter opened with an examination of the first stages of human development, the hunting stage, both in its most ancient examples, such as the history of ancient Israel, and in its contemporary expression, the savage societies of North America, Africa and the Pacific. After that, Alexander would move on to focus on the pasturage state, agricultural societies and finally he would look into current European commercial societies.

Like Kames and Millar, Alexander started with an account of the condition of women in primitive societies where men, owing to the harshness of material conditions, lived in a state of rudeness and necessity. In these societies, men had not yet developed a tender affection for the female sex and love was only sensual passion, which could be gratified easily and indiscriminately. Consequently, women were the drudges and slaves of men, subjected to the unrestrained power of men's strength; their lives were endless toil and misery: 'in the states of the most savage barbarity, or in those but a few degrees removed from it, women being considered only as the slaves and drudges of the men; and as

the instruments of population, are destined only to labour for their imperious tyrants, or to bring up their children'[171].

It was not until the coming of pasturage and, principally, agriculture and private property, that a degree of refinement was acquired among mankind. Improved material conditions resulted, on the one hand, in an increase of leisure and social distinctions and, on the other, in the formation of settled communities and the development of sociability and institutions. As a consequence, among the civilisations of Antiquity the condition of women was slightly improved, marriage was established and the arts and sciences began to be cultivated. But Alexander's view of ancient civilisations was mainly negative, with the exceptions of Egypt and republican Rome. His critique of ancient Greece and Imperial Rome, typical of the Scottish historians, revealed the eurocentric bias of Alexander's and Scottish histories of civilisation. The Graeco-Roman failure to couple political, institutional and artistic achievements with the attainment of a civilised degree of refinement, as demonstrated by their mistreatment and confinement of women, marked a watershed in the line of progress. From this moment onwards, the history of progress could only be traced in Europe. Alexander's account turned then to describe the gradual improvement in women's condition in Europe, in contrast with their unchanging and appalling situation in contemporary savage societies and in Eastern countries.

---

171 Alexander, *History of Women, I*, p. 90. See also, for instance, Alexander, *History of Women, I*, pp. 255-56.

European distinctiveness began with the Germanic tribes, whose virtuous and refined manners Alexander contrasted with the corruption of the Roman empire they eventually destroyed. Among these nations, women practised the virtues of chastity and modesty; they were respected and esteemed by their men who were endowed with a simple but refined sensibility and benefited from the company of women. Love sprang from affection and led to monogamous marriages based on greater equality between the sexes. Furthermore, ancient Germans set the basis of prospective European civility because their military ethos and sensibility originated the institution of chivalry, a fundamental step towards the advancement of women's condition, which 'laid the foundation of that politeness and urbanity, which now distinguish Europe from the rest of the world'[172].

Although the development of chivalry was one of the preconditions for a better treatment of women, its excesses and warlike attitude had first to be controlled. Chivalry brought about abundant advantages for women: chastity and delicacy were highly regarded, women's influence over society increased and they were better protected from the violence of that time[173]. But chivalric times were also a period of passionate extravagance, ignorance and superstition[174]. At this point Alexander introduced Christian belief as one of the elements that helped to overcome these ills and stimulated progress by means of the encouragement of peace and

---

[172] Alexander, *History of Women, I*, p. 483.

[173] See Alexander, *History of Women, I*, pp. 238-41.

[174] See Alexander, *History of Women, I*, pp. 249-52.

learning[175]. Religion, however, did not have an important role in Alexander's account and he frequently deemed it a drawback to women's improvement. Islam, in consonance with the orientalist discourse, was considered one of the causes of the debasement of the East. In relation to witch hunting and celibacy in Europe, Alexander attacked religious institutions and priesthood. As his furious critiques were directed mainly against the Catholic Church and its representatives[176], they can be related to contemporary anti-catholic currents, although they also seem to reflect the anticlerical ferment of the period that condemned religious fanaticism and superstition.

As a result, in Alexander's account, as in Millar's, it was not until the advent of modern commercial societies that women became 'neither the slaves nor the idols of the other sex, but their friends and companions'[177].

Alexander followed the four stages theory in its classical form, as developed by the Scottish philosophers and particularly by Millar, to whom he was certainly indebted. However, due to the main concern of the book, the evolution of women's nature and situation throughout time and space, Alexander adapted the four stages model to his purposes. The key notions of the four stages theory, namely modes of subsistence, property, law and manners, were directly linked to human progress through the examination of their role in the improvement of women's situation. While for

175 Alexander, *History of Women, I*, p. 242.

176 See, for instance, against nunneries, Alexander, *History of Women, II*, p. 24; in relation to witch hunting, pp. 80-92; in relation to celibacy, chapter 19.

177 Millar, *The Origin of the Distinction of Ranks*, p. 219.

most conjectural historians, women's status in society was an additional mark which accounted for the degree of progress achieved by men, for Alexander women's situation became an end in itself, the ultimate question which the four stages theory should account for. Thus, Alexander combined the conventional form of the four stages theory as developed by the Scots with a particular emphasis on the way these factors encouraged and determined women's situation in society. This was the case of savage societies, where the mode of subsistence was certainly linked with the harsh conditions of living and rude of primitive peoples but mainly with the abuse women received in barbaric nations. Such difficult conditions of living, Alexander remarked, led men to value strength over any other human quality and consequently to consider women as their inferiors and relegate them to a state of slavery. Similarly, the role of religion was directly linked with the fate of women. Having pointed out that in medieval Europe Christianity brought on more peaceful and restrained customs, Alexander emphasised that the finest outcome of the influence of religion was the respect and regard for the sex introduced by these softer manners.

Alexander, like the conjectural historians, was mainly concerned with issues of morality and manners because they constituted the core of civility, which was the main characteristic of progress. Manners, social affections and gender relations could not be regulated by law since they were natural virtues and completely dependent on sympathy. Therefore, although they recognised the importance of legal institutions and of the enforcement of justice, they gave preference to custom in their

accounts of civilisation because custom was the basis of conventions, social affections, private morality, and, hence, public morality. Custom was regarded a prerequisite for the fulfilment of the law and the necessary buttress of any improvement.

Necessity, which, as we have seen, played an essential role in the four stages model, was used by Alexander not only to explain the succession of stages of human development and its growing complexity but also to elucidate the origin of the distinction between the sexes. Although Alexander denied any male superiority over women, he certainly believed that each sex was different from the other. The sexes were endowed with distinctive faculties which were suitable for the different activities proper to them and for the complementary spheres of life they belonged to. As Alexander argued, the sexes had 'different sentiments and faculties, adapted to the different purposes for which they were intended'[178]. However, Alexander pointed out that, in spite of their different natural qualities, women, in need, could stand out by deploying male attributes, such as physical strength or patriotic courage. Travellers' accounts demonstrated that, in the harsh conditions of savage life where physical strength was vital for survival, women could rival men in their physical prowess. Ancient history also proved that, facing the threat of invasion, women could deploy the same patriotic sentiments and military ardour as men. Therefore, the difference between the sexes did not lie in their potential capabilities; men and women had different qualities but it was clear that women, if required, could assume men's role.

---

[178] Alexander, *History of Women, II*, p. 44.

It was the necessity of performing the tasks allotted to them by nature, therefore, which determined the characteristics of each sex.

In addition, Alexander considered the institution of monogamous marriages in the same footing as the establishment of private property, a key issue within the four stages theory. He argued that private property was certainly a spur to civilisation since it offered individuals the means to secure a livelihood and more prosperous standards of living. But marriage was placed alongside private property in its importance for improvement since, while private property brought security for the individual, marriage ensured the continuity of the species and the deference women deserved. In addition, law and private property were linked by Alexander to the progress not only of society but of women themselves. Private property, Alexander pointed out, not only improved social conditions but also the situation of women everywhere. He thus praised every social stage in which women had been granted by the law secure access to property and, as a result, socioeconomic relevance.

Education, similarly, figured prominently in Alexander's account. Together with material conditions, mode of subsistence, property, law and customs and manners, the accessibility of education for women marked the relative value of a society and was deemed a sign of the degree of progress which a society had achieved. Thus, leaving moral considerations aside, Alexander was reluctant to condemn the role played by the *hetairas* in ancient Greece society, who although being courtesans certainly possessed a sound education and the concomitant congenial virtues that the other women, confined at home, lacked.

5

Sympathy, Sensibility and the Refashioning of the Individual Self

The final decades of the eighteenth century were characterised in Europe, Britain and Scotland by a heated debate on the workings and influence of 'sensibility', 'sentiments' and 'feelings'. Although there have been attempts to clarify and single out the meaning of these terms, most authors have agreed on the vagueness of their differences; a vagueness that also characterises the notion of sensibility itself. As Anne C. Vila has put it,

> sensibility was a polysemous concept, a notion that not only cut across disciplinary boundaries, but represented several different things at once. (…) What allowed sensibility to sustain both those sets of meanings was the central role it played in fields as diverse as psychology,

> empiricist philosophy, sociomoral theory, medicine, aesthetics and literature, all of which were included in the loose confederation of naturalistic discourses then known as the "science of man"[1].

Several definitions have been provided by the recent outpouring of works on sensibility, which have emphasised the connections of the discourse of sensibility with related issues such as medicine, morality or the novel. Thus, Anne C. Vila has focused on the development of a medical discourse of sensibility and on its correspondence with the novel of feeling within the literary world. Similarly, Christopher Lawrence has pointed out the influence of the discourse of sensibility over the emphasis on the workings of the nervous system among the Scottish medical community. John Mullan, on his part, has delved into the implications of the language of sensibility for the literary undertakings of the final decades of the eighteenth century, were they novels or works of moral philosophy. A fourth approach can be found in the article 'Feminizing the Enlightenment: the Problem of Sensibility' by Jane Rendall in which the vocabulary of sensibility has been examined in relation to contemporary constructions of femininity and vindications of women's rights and place in society[2].

---

[1] Anne C. Vila, *Enlightenment and Pathology. Sensibility in the Literature and Medicine of Eighteenth Century France* (Baltimore, 1998), p. 80.

[2] See Vila, *Enlightenment and Pathology*, Christopher Lawrence, 'The Nervous System and Society in the Scottish Enlightenment', in Barry Barnes and Steven Shapin (eds.), *Natural Order. Historical Studies of Scientific Culture* (Beverly Hills & London, 1979), pp. 19-40, John Mullan, *Sentiment and Sociability: The Language of Feeling in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 1988) and Jane Rendall, 'Feminizing the Enlightenment: The Problem of Sensibility', in Martin Fitzpatrick, Peter Jones and Iain McCalman (eds.), *The Enlightenment World* (London, 2004), pp. 253-271.

As this variety of approaches points out, the meanings attributed to sensibility were linked to the development of medical theories of the nervous system, to psychological theories, which gave primacy to the senses in the production of knowledge, and to the expansion of a literary genre, the novel of feeling, whose characters confronted moral dilemmas (generally of a passionate nature) by negotiating refinement of manners and the physical exteriorisation of acute inner emotions. Thus, although sensibility was initially associated with physiological and sensorial experience, it was also related to the realm of morality through the notion of sympathy, by whose operations one partook of other people's feelings and was enabled to act in a humane and virtuous way. Sensibility also came to be seen as delicacy of thought and feeling, and as a mark of aesthetic and behavioural taste. At the same time, it offered ways of signifying class and sexual difference. Women were supposed to posses finer and more delicate feelings, and an acute sensibility which suited them for the domestic sphere but made them prone to nervous disorders and weakness. A distinctive sensibility could be also the mark of the aristocracy and the wealthy classes who had yielded to the polluting and unnerving effects of luxury and consumption. As the latter case pointed out, sensibility was fraught with dangers which, although more visible among certain individuals from particular social backgrounds, certainly threatened everyone involved in the world of politeness and civility.

Due to the proliferation of works on sensibility and to the many understandings of the term, several definitions of the notion are now available. Sensibility may be analysed in the light of its

implications for the realm of morality as 'a lively and delicate feeling, a quick sense of right and wrong, in all human actions, and other objects considered in every view of morality and taste'[3]. According to the *Encyclopédie*, 'sensibility is the mother of humanity, of generosity; it fosters merit, aids the intelligence and carries persuasion in its wake'[4]. In the words of Anne C. Vila, sensibility

> was seen as the root of all human perception and reflections, as the innate and active principle of sociability that gave rise to human society, as a kind of sixth sense whose special affective energy was essential both to virtue and to art, and finally, as the paradigmatic vital force whose actions could be detected in every bodily function, be it healthful or morbid[5].

However, the definition of this difficult term offered by Annie Van Sant seems to be particularly useful as it combines an attention to the varied implications of the term with conciseness and clarity. Sensibility then, was

> an organic sensitivity dependent on brain and nerves and underlying a) a delicate moral and aesthetic perception; b) acuteness of feeling, both emotional and physical; and c) susceptibility to delicate passional arousal. Though belonging to all, greater degrees of sensibility – often to a point of fragility – are characteristic of women and upper

[3] Paul Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People. England, 1727-1783* (Oxford, 1989), p. 463.

[4] Vila, *Enlightenment and Pathology*, p. 1.

[5] Vila, *Enlightenment and Pathology*, p. 10.

> classes. Excessive delicacy or acuteness of feeling produces an impaired or diseased estate[6].

Although the discourse of sensibility was felt in different degrees across Europe, current authors have drawn attention to its pervasiveness in late eighteenth century Britain. Such was the influence of the discourse of sensibility that G. J. Barker-Benfield has argued that a 'cult of sensibility' was the distinctive feature of British society in the turn of the century while Paul Langford has identified a 'sentimental revolution' in the third quarter of the eighteenth century. Philip Carter has delved into the connexions between politeness and sensibility in his *Men and the Emergence of Polite Society* in which he contended that the culture of sensibility was a turn assumed by the culture of politeness in an attempt to strengthen the connexions between gentility of manners and inner virtue, at a time when the moral emptiness of polite refinement was criticised[7].

The culture of sensibility was certainly linked to economic growth and the rise of the middle classes which made of British society a 'commercial and polite people'. Having profited from the new opportunities offered by imperial expansion and commercial riches, the middle classes embraced the new standards of gentility characterised by the vague but certainly recognisable marks of

---

[6] Annie Van Sant, *Eighteenth Century Sensibility and the Novel. The Senses in Social Context* (Cambridge, 1993), p. 1.

[7] See G. J. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth Century Britain* (Chicago, 1992), Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People* and Philip Carter, *Men and the Emergence of Polite Society, 1660-1800* (Harlow, England & New York, 2001).

politeness and sensibility. Sentiment had an especial appeal for the middle classes who sought to consolidate not only their economic position but also a refined status at a time when the flexibility of the social ladder and the rising standards of living turned refinement of manners into a key feature of one's position among their peers and in front of their social inferiors. Gentility and a free and natural sociability also helped the middle classes to differentiate themselves from the artificiality of the court and the emptiness of aristocratic deference and behavioural codes, while the emphasis on sensitive humanity and warmth of feeling set a moral boundary between the simple and affectionate ways of the bourgeois household and the pompous but morally corrupt customs of the aristocracy[8].

The urban renaissance which characterised eighteenth century Britain offered venues for the polite display of refinement and gentleness. The newly refurbished towns (such as London after the fire and Edinburgh) were designed alongside codes of refined behaviour, including spaces for polite recreation and socialisation such as gardens, promenades and walks on the river banks, which were suitable for conversation, socialisation and mixed company. The mushrooming towns and cities combined sites for the expression of traditional popular culture, such as the alehouse, with the mushrooming of play houses, theatres and coffee houses providing the middle and upper middle classes with adequate sites

---

[8] Carter, *Men and the Emergence of Polite Society*, Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People*, Wilfrid Prest, *Albion Ascendant. English History, 1660-1815* (New York, 1998) and Kathleen Wilson, *The Sense of the People. Politics, Culture and Imperialism in England, 1715-1785* (New York, 1995).

for socialisation and leisure according to the new codes of civility. As a result, bourgeois women were enabled to enter a new public world modelled along the lines of the walks, streets, shopping parades and amusement centres of the urban renaissance. These spaces provided also new places where the necessary encounters and interplay of the marriage market took place. Although most of these sites were suitable for the mixed intercourse of men and women of good breeding, some of them, like the coffee houses, were mainly intended for exclusive male sociability. As their rapid growth testifies, they certainly gathered a great number of costumers attracted by the availability of press and the supply of fashionable drinks brought from the colonies (such as tea and coffee) and many of them held periodical discussions and debates on the most controversial issues of the time. However, they were often the target of criticisms which reproved the wide consumption of enervating beverages and accused them of blurring class distinctions and promoting sedition and rebellion by encouraging free speech and 'pompous disputation'[9].

Politeness was closely linked to mass consumption, a phenomenon whose roots have been placed in the eighteenth century. Gentle deportment and manners should be accompanied by an exhibition of polished taste in dress and living. Thus, the sites of politeness were not only venues for 'natural' socialisation but also places where prosperity was paraded (although certainly within the boundaries of refined elegance and style which singled

[9] See Carter, *Men and the Emergence of Polite Society*, Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People*, Prest, *Albion Ascendant* and Wilson, *The Sense of the People*.

out true politeness from the lavishness of the aristocracy and the ostentation of recently enriched newcomers). Similarly, as the household became the distinguishing mark of middle class refinement and the foundation of one's claims to a polite reputation, it also became the end of most middle class consumption. Eighteenth century mass consumption was markedly domestic orientated and thus the most demanded items were china, crockery, fine textiles, furniture, sugar, tea and coffee.

In many ways, the discourse of sensibility was, as Carter has suggested, a reaction to what were seen as the excesses of politeness. The emphasis on outer demeanour which the culture of politeness involved came to be considered somewhat excessive. Politeness could be a source of falsehood and deception by leading people to give priority to external manners over inner virtue and by sanctioning superficial behaviour, which could easily conceal questionable and hidden motives. Sensibility, feeling and sentiment were hence used to reinforce the close links which ought to exist between manners and inner sympathetic virtue. While politeness was seen to emphasise outer and public behaviour as the essentials of refinement, sentiment stressed inner feeling and overt compassionate humanity as the kernel of civility. Sensibility emerged as a 'new type of refinement', whose merits lay in its priorisation of benevolent spontaneity over what many sentimental authors saw as the potential artifice of polite living[10].

Even so, we should be careful when speaking of sensibility and politeness as two different ideas and discourses. Both terms

[10] See Carter, *Men and the Emergence of Polite Society*, p. 27-33.

shared a common emphasis on propriety, decorum, elegance of manners and attention to the well-being and the feelings of others. Contemporary commentators often saw no difference between both terms and applied them interchangeably. Moreover, the emergence of sensibility never completely replaced the well-established vocabulary of politeness and polite living. It may be more adequate then to understand sensibility as a reworking of the culture of politeness, that is, as a further development of the discourse of civility and refinement when confronted with criticisms and accusations of duplicity.

Sensibility also involved a rebuke of the links of the culture of politeness with the public sphere, which was now frequently termed as 'the world'. The sentimental men and women would prefer the cosy tenderness of the family and domestic gatherings to the fashionable amusements of play houses, assembly rooms and coffee houses. In this respect, the discourse of sensibility emerged as an intimate, domestic driven form of politeness which encouraged men and women to leave the frivolity and artificiality of 'the world' and turn instead to the smaller, more private company of close friends and family. Eventually, the language of sensibility would, if not overtly censure, at least limit the opportunities for mixed sociability by encouraging men and women to prefer the charms of the home and family over public amusements and the company of strangers. Quite unsurprisingly, sentimental writers were prone to condemn the busy and fashionable urban life and commend the natural and simple ways of a more secluded country life.

In addition, the language of sensibility resulted in a criticism of the strong links forged between polite living and consumerism. Sentimental condemnation of 'the world' and the futility of following whimsical fashions went generally hand in hand with cautions against lavish spending and the dangers of luxury over the body politic and the individual body. On the one hand, consumerism and the constant flow of riches and products of mass consumption from the colonies were deemed the source of political emasculation and the decline of patriotic and manly virtues. The criticism of luxury and consumption had clear gender implications; women were considered to be particularly prone to irresponsible consumption due to the fact that the household was the end of most middle class purchases and to the belief that, because of their especial sensibility, women were easily impressionable by material things. On the other hand, a life of affluence and idleness was regarded as one of the main causes of sensibility imbalances, giving way to disorders such as melancholy and vapours.

Even though, the culture of sensibility was certainly linked to mass consumption and commercialisation. Although the sentimental home was praised by its simplicity and lack of the over-refinements of luxury, it was undoubtedly well fitted with commodities which enhanced family life and allowed the household to rival the attractions of the alehouse and the coffee house in seeking male attention. The domestic household had to be equipped with furniture, carpets, kitchenware to ensure the degree of conveniences necessary for a happy family life; separate

rooms and curtains were necessary to maintain privacy and to limit the servants' alleged harmful influence over the children.

In addition, the spread of the culture of sensibility was indebted to the commercialisation of print. Literacy and reading were signs of refinement and personal improvement. The discourse of sensibility was conveyed to the middle and upper classes through a wide array of literary genres. The most relevant of those was the novel of feeling which reached widespread popularity in the last decades of the eighteenth century. Sentimental writers stressed men's capacity to enter relations with women based on respect and mutual appreciation, emphasised the physical expression of compassionate and tender feelings by both men and women, and portrayed an inner world of sentiment as a main determinant of the character's actions and attitudes. Behavioural guides, mainly directed to women, established a code of femininity based on women's peculiar sensibility in which restraint of the passions and domesticity were encouraged. Periodicals, magazines and sermons also diffused the virtues of gentleness, softness and sentimental refinement. Prominent philosophers such as David Hume commented on the virtues of refinement, taste and sensibility in their essays, a format simpler than the conventional treatise, which allowed them to reach a wider audience. More dogmatic authors such as Fordyce and Hugh Blair used sermons to instruct the readers on the merits and pitfalls of sensibility[11].

---

[11] Barker-Benfield, *Culture of Sensibility*, Carter, *Men and the Emergence of Polite Society*, Hugh Blair, *Sermons* (London, 1834), David Hume, *Selected Essays* (Oxford, 1998).

Periodicals such as the *Tatler* and the *Spectator* combined advice on suitable behaviour with a readable layout which contributed to their enormous popularity. These periodicals reached a remarkable circulation, selling between 3000 and 4000 copies per edition and even reaching peaks of 12.000 copies. Due to their success, compilations and reprints of early editions were frequently issued while imitators, such as the *Female Spectator*, the *Rambler*, the *Mirror* and the *Lounger*, mushroomed extending the influence of this kind of literature to wider sections of the public. The popularity of periodicals resulted in the emergence of a similar genre, the magazine, which, combining commentaries, satires and didactic fiction, was a 'lighter' version of the periodical genre and from the 1730s enjoyed similar levels of popularity[12].

However, it should be remarked that the influence of written guides on polite and sentimental behaviour was considered to be limited. Some authors have remarked the existence of a gap between the modes of good behaviour sanctioned by these diverse forms of literature and the actual interpretation and actions of the reader. Others have stressed that the significance of politeness and sensibility as marks of one's status was modified by other sources of identity such as gender, class, or geography. In addition, contemporaries were convinced that the path towards gentility was marked by actions rather than words and confronted the unlearned and effortless refinement of the sentimental man with the artificiality and dryness of the erudite but often socially inept scholar.

---

[12] See Carter, *Men and the Emergence of Polite Society*, pp. 30-45.

SENSIBILITY AND SYMPATHY IN THE SCOTTISH ENLIGHTENMENT

John Dwyer is the main source for the study of the influence of the language of sensibility on the authors of the Scottish Enlightenment. He has shown the relevance of issues of gentleness, humanity and sympathy on the Scottish Enlightenment's understanding of the civilising process, morality, social relations and marriage. Due to their concern with ethical issues and the survival of the moral community, and to the primacy given to the relation between private and public virtue, the Scottish authors placed a high value on human affection, feelings and sympathetic sociability[13].

In addition, the authors of the Scottish Enlightenment argued that the development of sensibility and sympathy among men was one of the main outcomes of a historical process, in which individual development was as important as economic, political and institutional progress. John Millar's *Origin of the Distinction of Ranks*, a 'seminal document of the Scottish Enlightenment' according to John Dwyer, exemplifies this point[14]. In this work, the path towards civilisation was marked by, on the one hand, the development of liberty, property, structured government and growing economic complexity and prosperity. On the other hand, it was characterised by the refinement of man's feelings, *i.e.* a

---

[13] See John Dwyer, *Virtuous Discourse: Sensibility and Community in Eighteenth Century Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1987) and John Dwyer, *The Age of the Passions. An Interpretation of Adam Smith and the Scottish Enlightenment* (East Lothian, 1998).

[14] Dwyer, *The Age of the Passions*, p. 84.

greater capacity for the humane passions of generosity, kindness and compassion, a growing tenderness towards the female sex, and an increasing attachment to the joys of family life and domestic marriage. In his account of the rise of society from rudeness to civilisation, economic prosperity, political liberty and a freer exchange between the sexes worked together to bring about true civility, a state in which the refinement of individual virtues and passions went together with gentle social intercourse and a peaceful, prosper and organised public life.

The authors of the Scottish Enlightenment responded positively to the criticisms of the dangers of over-refinement which the culture of sensibility involved. Aware of the links between politeness and luxury in commercial societies, the Scottish literati stressed the sentimental substrata that should underlie true refinement and civility. Under the influence of the discourse of sensibility, the Scots developed a sustained criticism of the luxurious mores of the cities (especially London) and of the obscure motivations of those acting spurred solely by profit and the latest fashions. They sought to furnish the new commercial men with sound ethics with which they could safely conduct their transactions within 'the world' and discriminate between the most frivolous trappings of politeness and its moral kernel.

Against the dangers of an encroaching 'world' and a too dissipated intercourse between the sexes, the Scottish philosophers defined smaller, more private spaces within which sociability could be safely cultivated and practised, the family being the most adequate and intimate of all. For the Scots, thus, private life (*i.e.* the family and a small circle of friends) constituted the proper

setting of civility, where gentle feelings could be nourished and a healthy sociability could be developed as the basis of morals. By linking feeling with sympathy and morality, in the wider domain of socialisation, and with love and domestic tenderness, in the intimate sphere of the family, the Scots developed a 'sentimental ethic' which would sustain public and private morality.

The authors of the Scottish Enlightenment devoted a great deal of attention to the sections of society which were more vulnerable to the deceits and excesses of feeling: women and the young. Both were somewhat united in their possession of a natural tenderness and quickness of feeling which was fraught with perils. The natural humanity of the youth and the female sex could, if not properly tended, be misled and damaged by the ways of the 'world'. Adolescents and women were not naturally fitted to contend with the dangers which the 'world' posed to their tender and feeling characters.

Women's delicate sensibilities generated especial anxieties for female reputations and lives could be permanently damaged by a wrong step. As the outpouring of conduct books proved, concerns about young women were particularly acute since they were the focus of apprehensions regarding both the young and the female sex. Young girls' vivacity and especial sensibility should be moulded from an early age along the lines of chastity, modesty and delicacy to avoid their falling prey to the ways of 'the world' and their adopting a superficial over-refinement, incompatible with virtue and with their role as reforming agents of men's rougher sensibilities. As a result, the home emerged as a safeguard and school of morality, where the virtue of the young would be

preserved and strengthened, and where women would acquire their distinctive virtues and polish men's manners through polite sociability and domestic affection.

The language of sensibility was diffused in Scotland not only through the works of the most remarkable authors of the Scottish Enlightenment but also through more informal printed materials such as periodicals (the *Mirror*, the *Lounger*, the *Caledonian Mercury* and the *Scots Magazine*) and novels (especially through the works of Henry Mackenzie and Macpherson's *Ossian Poems*). Regarding the diffusion of the ideals of sensibility and gentleness we should refer also to sermons, a genre preferred by some of the most remarkable authors of the Scottish Enlightenment, a movement whose links with the moderate party of the Presbyterian Church have been already pointed out[15].

Particularly remarkable in this respect were Hugh Blair's *Sermons*, due in part to the privileged position of the author within the Scottish Enlightenment. Hugh Blair (1718-1800), minister of the Church of Scotland and Professor of rhetoric at the University of Edinburgh, was one of the most remarkable intellectuals of the Scotland of his time. Highly influential among the moderate circle of the Church of Scotland, he enjoyed the friendship of most of the leading figures of the Scottish Enlightenment, such as David Hume and Lord Kames. His merits as a preacher and critic were greatly admired by his contemporaries. His sermons were praised for their skilled rhetoric and genteel use of the language not only in

[15] Richard L. Sher, *Church and University in the Scottish Enlightenment* (Edinburgh, 1985). See chapter 3 of this PhD thesis.

Scotland but also in Britain and Europe. They enjoyed extraordinary popularity and were frequently reprinted and even translated into French[16].

The language of sensibility and feeling was particularly prominent in Hugh Blair's *Sermons*, in which sensibility was considered not only a main component of a refined life but also a primary element of Christian faith. His sermon 'On Sensibility' offered an overview of his understanding of such notion. According to Blair, the human being was a compound of self-love and social and benevolent instincts, the latter of which he termed sensibility:

> the perfection of his [man's] nature is measured by the counterpoise of those social principles which, tempering the force of the selfish affections, render man equally useful to himself and to those with whom he is joined in society. Hence the use and value of sensibility[17].

Sensibility, moreover, was essential to happiness, for man was undoubtedly a social animal. Blair remarked that 'man as a solitary individual is a very wretched being' and went on to say that 'we are formed by nature to unite; we are impelled towards each other by the compassionate instincts in our frame; we are linked by a thousand connections founded on common wants'[18].

---

[16] On Hugh Blair's life, career and intellectual milieu, see Sher, *Church and University*. On Hugh Blair and the discourse of sensibility, see Dwyer, *Virtuous Discourse*.

[17] Blair, *Sermons*, p. 331.

[18] Blair, *Sermons*, p. 54.

Sensibility could be possessed in different degrees, was 'connected with acuteness in all our feelings' and could be defined as the sympathy towards the others, which prompted men to share the grief and joy of their fellow men. This sympathy or sensibility was an inner quality, although it was also expressed physically through bodily signs; it led men 'to rejoice with them that rejoice and to weep with them that weep'[19]. It was certainly a quality more related to feelings than reason and, as a result, acted powerfully as a moral force: 'it is the state of the heart which determines our moral character', Blair declared[20]. Moreover, among all the factors which impelled men to act ethically and fulfil the social duties of life, Blair ascribed a privileged role to the 'sensibility of a feeling heart'. Unlike the principle of fear and selfishness and the principle of duty, sensibility was a softer but stronger principle in securing morality since, thanks to sensibility, a virtuous action was followed by a pleasant feeling. In Blair's words,

> to him that is prompted by virtuous sensibility, every office of beneficence and humanity is a pleasure. He gives, assists and relieves, not merely because he is bound to do so, but because it would be painful for him to refrain. Hence the smallest benefit he confers rises in its value, on account of its carrying the affection of the giver impressed on the gift[21].

Sensibility was essential not only to private dealings between individuals but also to public virtue: 'how happy, then, would it be

---

[19] Blair, *Sermons*, pp. 334 and 332.

[20] Blair, *Sermons*, p. 171.

[21] Blair, *Sermons*, p. 333.

to mankind if this affectionate disposition prevailed more generally in the world! How much would the sum of public virtue and public felicity be increased if men were always inclined to rejoice with them that rejoice and weep with them that weep'[22].

However, Blair was equally concerned with preventing the dangers of sensibility. He warned against the abuses of sensibility, especially against the 'capricious and irritable delicacy', which was contrary to the 'plain and native tenderness of the heart' and productive of 'disquiet and uneasiness' rather than pleasurable affection and friendship[23]. He was also keen on remarking that sensibility alone was not enough; it should be balanced by other qualities in order to achieve complete virtue:

> complete virtue (...) supposes sensibility, good temper and benevolent affections; it includes them as essential parts; but it reaches farther (...) it requires them to be supported by justice, temperance, fortitude and all those other virtues which enable us to act with propriety on the trying situations of life[24].

As this extract proved, Blair was anxious about the troublesome implications which sensibility had for contemporary notions of masculinity and thus wanted to strengthen the sentimental man with the virtues derived from a Christian stoic stance. He emphasised that sensibility was not at odds with masculinity; rough, male behaviour was perfectly compatible with an affectionate heart since soft manners were but a minor part of

---

[22] Blair, *Sermons*, p. 333.

[23] Blair, *Sermons*, p. 336.

[24] Blair, *Sermons*, p. 336.

sensibility, whose importance should not be overrated: 'manliness and sensibility are so far from being incompatible that the truly brave are for the most part generous and humane; while the soft and effeminate are hardly capable of any vigorous exertion'[25]. Blair was thus concerned not only with the incompatibility of masculinity and sensibility but also with the emasculating implications of a excessive sensibility which was more akin to the finer delicacy of women than to the dignified if emotional sympathy of men.

Blair was very much aware of the dangers of confusing the external signs of sensibility, softness of manners and gentleness of behaviour, with the real inner affectionate nature of true sensibility. Accordingly, he stressed the capacity for deception that the emphasis on manners involved: 'the external manners alone may be learned in the school of the world; and often, too often, are found to cover much unfeeling hardness of the heart'[26]. He insisted on this issue in his sermon 'On Gentleness' in which Blair commented on the dangers derived from a detachment between manners and fellow feeling. He warned the reader against mistaking true gentleness 'with that artificial courtesy, that studied smoothness of manners, which is learned in the school of the world. Such accomplishments, the most frivolous and empty may possess, too often they are employed by the artful, as a snare; too often affected by the hard and unfeeling as a cover to the baseness of their minds'. External demeanour, he went on, should be the

[25] Blair, *Sermons*, p. 335.

[26] Blair, *Sermons*, p. 335.

reflection of inner virtue because 'that gentleness which is the characteristic of a good man has, like every other virtue, its seat in the heart; and let me add, nothing except what follows from the heart, can render external manners truly pleasing'[27].

Being a decisive component of morality, sensibility was thus an essential quality of the good Christian. He argued that the faithful should aim at gentleness of manners and heart and lamented that gentleness was 'more readily considered by the bulk of men as a mere felicity of nature or an exterior accomplishment of manners, than as a Christian virtue which they are bound to cultivate'[28]. In his sermon 'On Sensibility' he clearly affirmed 'that it [sensibility] constitutes an essential part of a religious character, there can be no doubt'[29]. Moreover, Blair was keen to depict Christ as a sentimental man and he often used his figure as an example of true sensibility and gentleness[30]. Christ 'was eminent for the same attribute of mild and gentle goodness' and possessed a sympathetic heart which led him to join Lazarus's friends in their grief and weep for his death, in spite of knowing that he would be brought back from death.

Scottish authors such as Adam Smith and David Hume based their understanding of morality on feeling and passions rather than reason. For them, sympathy and sociability were key determinants

---

[27] Blair, *Sermons*, pp. 51-52.

[28] Blair, *Sermons*, p. 50.

[29] Blair, *Sermons*, p. 331.

[30] On this topic see, 'On the Compassion of Christ', Blair, *Sermons*.

of both private and public virtue. By prompting men to act virtuously in their private actions, sympathy and sociability ensured the durability and strength of the network of social relations and eventually the viability of the community.

In his *A Treatise of Human Nature*, David Hume embarked on setting the grounds for a 'science of man'. He devoted the first part of the book to explain the mechanisms of the human understanding, namely, the workings and genesis of impressions and ideas. The second part of the *Treatise* was entirely devoted to the analysis of the passions and bore witness to the privileged role he ascribed to the passions and feelings in human morality and actions. The third part consisted of an analysis of morality in which he explored the role of the passions in achieving morality, using the notion of sympathy to argue for the interplay of feelings and (secondarily) reason in achieving private and public virtue[31].

Following contemporary trends of sensationalist psychology, Hume gave primacy to the senses in the formation of our conceptions and ideas. He argued for the key role of impressions (gathered through experience and sensorial stimulus) in the genesis of ideas and the functioning of our understanding.

In the second book of the *Treatise*, Hume reacted against the divide between passions and reason by virtue of which reason was treated as a superior human faculty that ought to have primacy over feelings. Instead, he considered the passions as 'integral and positive features of human nature and human experience', whose

---

[31] David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Oxford, 2003). On Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature* see Mullan, *Sentiment and Sociability*, chapter 1 and Rendall, 'Feminizing the Enlightenment'.

workings could be described and explained by the new science of man[32]. According to Hume, the passions directed humans to all action and achievement whereas the role of reason was to serve the passions and obey them. The vocabulary of sensibility was present in the book, for it argued that passions could not be simply reduced to instinct or appetites; they were rather identified with feelings and sentiments.

In the third part of the book, Hume delved into the implications for morality of such an understanding of human passions. According to Hume, morality was not founded on reason. Rational calculation could show how best to achieve our ends or which actions were desirable to society; however, reason alone could not determine our ultimate desires and was hence incapable of moving us to action, except in accordance with some prior want or desire. Therefore, moral distinctions were not the product of some innate ideas or rational thinking but were rather based on moral sentiments. According to Hume, a virtuous action would produce an agreeable feeling, a moral sentiment of approbation. Similarly, vice would be productive of a disagreeable feeling or impression, a moral sentiment of disapproval. The rest of the book was devoted to describe the circumstances in which these moral sentiments arise, which could be of an external nature (the environment in which humans live) or of an internal kind (such as the features of human nature)[33].

---

[32] Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, introduction, p. 49.

[33] Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature.*

Hume distinguished between natural virtues and artificial virtues. The former derived from human nature and had no 'dependence on [the] artifice or conventions of men'[34]. Natural virtues, such as generosity and humanness, were an essential part of human nature and invariably accompanied human experience. These passions produced positive sentiments of moral approval whenever they were observed. Artificial virtues depended on conventions that had developed during relatively long periods of time. They were not inherent to man, although they derived ultimately from inherent features of human nature, particularly from self-interest. Artificial virtues had a key role in social arrangements: they were necessary to promote and maintain public good. They developed progressively alongside human social evolution, as a response to the problems arising from the growing complexity of human life and society.

Both types of virtues depended on the workings of sympathy, a key notion in Hume's understanding of morality. Sympathy was a fundamental feature of human nature, enabling man to experience as their own the sentiments or opinions of others. The important role Hume attributed to sympathy underlined the social character of his system of morality and the role of the passions. Allowing the communication of feelings and prompting the rise of moral sentiments, sympathy acted as the cement of society, keeping its members together by allowing them to share a similar code of morality[35].

---

[34] Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, p. 367.

[35] Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature.*

The operations of sympathy were relevant to the workings of natural and artificial virtues alike. Regarding natural virtues, sympathy allowed men to take into account not only the action itself but also the motives behind it and, by ignoring their own self-interest, to experience a distinctive moral sentiment of approbation or disapprobation.

Concerning the artificial virtues, the workings of sympathy were more complex. Artificial virtues, such as justice, arose as a result of self-interest. Accordingly, the members of a human society decided to condemn stealing as a vice in order to protect their possessions. In the first moment, and in small communities, as the common interest underlying artificial virtues was evident to everybody, they were commonly upheld. However, as society progressed, these conventions became moral sentiments in a natural way; they were perceived by the members of society as having a moral content rather than being the product of custom or law, without considering whether they resulted in their own benefit. According to Hume, sympathy played a key role in the internalisation of such conventions as virtues. It enabled men to transcend their selfish interest and feel moral pleasure and pain derived from just and unjust actions inflicted on others. Consequently, men valued common advantage over their private benefit and gave value to the system of justice as the means to promote public good[36].

Apart from *A Treatise of Human Nature*, the vocabulary of sensibility should be also noted in several of Hume's *Essays*. In his

[36] Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature.*

essay 'Of Delicacy of Taste and Passion' Hume sought to distinguish between two types of sensibility, 'delicacy of taste' and 'delicacy of passion'. He praised the former as the just measure of sensibility and condemned the latter for leading to excesses of sensibility. Those who suffered from delicacy of passion were affected by an extreme susceptibility to the vicissitudes of life; thus, they were prone to despair or excessive joy and showed a distinctive lack of self-composure. By contrast, delicacy of taste consisted in a fine and attuned sensibility, particularly to beauty and the pleasures of life. It allowed men to enjoy friendship, conversation, the sciences and the arts. Those who possessed this commendable quality were incapable of rough emotions and lacked the insensible character and disposition of the 'men of the world'. Instead, they were prompted by this mellow disposition to all the tender and agreeable passions[37].

Adam Smith elaborated on Hume's concept of sympathy in order to negotiate the contradictory nature of man, compounded of self-interest and social instincts. In his *Theory of the Moral Sentiments*, he argued that man's social appetites were limited by his selfish tendencies, thus dismissing those theories which endorsed man's natural benevolence and altruism. However, selfishness was equally restricted by men's social impulses or sympathy, inducing them to act ethically. Men's social nature made them desire the sympathy of their fellow men. Accordingly, on the one hand, men acted in accordance with what was expected from them by the

[37] See Hume, *Selected Essays*, pp. 10-13.

others and, on the other, as observers of other people's actions, they would put themselves in the place of the agent and judge whether his/her actions were appropriate or not. In this way, men would develop an inner moral sense, or 'impartial spectator', which would allow them to judge sympathetically but justly the actions of their fellow men. Even if Adam Smith referred to individual restrictions to self-interest, such as self-control and prudence, he still gave preference to social controls, affirming that the former were performed to achieve fellow sympathy and were better learnt in society[38].

MEDICAL DISCOURSES OF SENSIBILITY

The popularity of the language of sensibility in the eighteenth century was certainly indebted to the emergence of contemporary medical discourses which focused on the workings of the nervous system and treated the body as an organic entity. Within this approach, the notion of sensibility was particularly useful since it enabled to relate the physical operations of the body to the characteristics of human personality and *vice versa*. However, despite of being an innovation within the medical field, the eighteenth century emphasis on nerves and sensations was indebted to the early works of Newton and Locke which lay the basis of sensational psychology.

In his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), John Locke dismissed the idea that human beings were born with innate

[38] Dwyer, *The Age of the Passions*, chapter 1.

ideas and affirmed that the human mind was initially like a blank sheet of paper where ideas were afterwards imprinted. He dissolved the barrier between thought and feeling by considering the former the product of a series of feelings and responses to external stimulus. According to Locke, human ideas had their origin in the senses, whose sensations were transmitted through the nerves to the brain where, through processes of reflection, ideas were formed[39]

Locke's psychology was indebted to Newtonian physics. Newton argued that the nerves transmitted sensorial impressions to the brain through vibrations and called 'sensorium' the termination of the nerves in the brain. As this scheme held the danger of encouraging passivity, Newton introduced the operations of the will, which reinforced sensations in the brain and propagated its response through the nerves to the muscles[40].

Early in the eighteenth century the medical field was dominated by a mechanical conception of the body whose main representative was Hermann von Boerhaave of Leyden. He held that the body was like a hydraulic machine and alleged that the soul, the repository of sensations and will, was unconnected with the vital functions. Before mid-century, the iatromechaniscism of Boerhaave was replaced by an organic conception of the body in which the operations of the nervous system were considered of capital importance.

---

[39] Barker-Benfield, *Culture of Sensibility*, pp. 3-6.

[40] Barker-Benfield, *Culture of Sensibility*, pp. 3-6.

The change of paradigm could be explained by elements of different nature, being both the product of medical considerations and of the wider intellectual milieu. The empiricist perspective of Locke had shifted the study of the mind away from Cartesian dualism and towards an emphasis on how the intellectual faculties arose from the sense organs. Sensibility was already a common notion in literature and moral philosophy, where it had been associated with sociability, virtue and benevolent feeling towards the others. In addition, the sociological ideas of Montesquieu and Buffon had emphasised the power of environmental factors in shaping individuals and societies. The focus on sensibility and on the nerves provided medical practitioners with a way of linking together the disparate elements then circulating in the intellectual field and of integrating new clinical techniques for observing and treating bodily disorders[41].

Within the medical field, several factors contributed to the change in paradigm. A quest for more natural remedies was accompanied by a growing uneasiness with the therapeutic applications of iatromechanicism, which often entailed aggressive treatments, like copious bleedings, trephinations and harsh purgatives. At the same time, patients were demanding a more active role in achieving health and well-being. Sensibility satisfied these claims and the intellectual demand for a more dynamic explanation of the body as an organism, offering the physicians

[41] Vila, *Enlightenment and Pathology*, pp. 14, and 40-43.

subtler forms of tackling illnesses and patients a greater involvement on the management of their health[42].

The new medical paradigm sought to articulate the various influences acting upon man's organism and to link the operations of body and mind by concentrating on the nervous system and the workings of sympathy. The nervous system served as a bridge between body and mind, for it possessed attributes from both, and between man and his environment, for it was thought to be affected by the latter. Sensibility emerged as a key notion since it was used to refer to the properties of the nervous system and to its susceptibility to external impressions. Being the foundation of all feelings and determining the quality of the impressions that reached the mind, man's higher attributes, such as taste, imagination and the capacity to reason, were deeply linked to variations of sensibility and, accordingly, could be also possessed in different degrees. The sensibility of the nerves varied according to innate qualities, the physical state and the conditions which surrounded the individual. Similarly, degrees of sensibility could be affected by man's external circumstances and had often a counterpart in man's physical features. Sensibility was thus affected by disease, diet, weather, labour and so forth; a fine sensibility was usually accompanied by refined taste, speech and demeanour and it could be ruined or further improved by one's environment and lifestyle.

As a result of the development of the medical discourse of sensibility, the figure of the physician gained higher merit.

---

42 Vila, *Enlightenment and Pathology*, pp. 40-43.

According to this paradigm, great physical and intellectual powers were necessary not only to identify the bodily signs of disease but also to understand their interrelation with other physical and mental symptoms, and to envisage the ways in which illnesses could be prevented and cured. In addition, combined with Montesquieu's emphasis on the influence of the environment on national characters, medical theories of sensibility fostered the emergence of the figure of the 'philosophical physician' who, through observation and possessing a finely attuned sensibility, could detect the sometimes hidden and always subtle operations of sensibility and, thus, would even have the capacity to diagnose the ills that affected entire nations[43].

In Europe, Albrecht von Haller led the reaction against iatromechanicism. He sought to develop an empirically grounded understanding of how organic structures and functions were integrated and thus to give the science of the organism a more rigorous foundation. He used the notion of sensibility, defined as the capacity to feel and prompt physical activities willed by the soul, in order to bridge the stark separation between the activities of the soul and the activities of the body. The *Encyclopédie* played a substantial role not only in propagating the new medicine of sensibility but also in constituting it as a unique and influential discourse. In Britain, George Cheyne popularized the turn towards the nervous system within the medical field. According to him, diseases were the product of the weakening of the nervous system whose operations also determined the varied degrees of sensibility

[43] Vila, *Enlightenment and Pathology*, pp. 54-63.

and receptivity to external impressions. However, variations in sensibility were also the product of environmental factors[44].

In Scotland, the influence of vitalism and organic conceptions of the body were particularly significant. In tune with the emphasis of the Scottish philosophers on feelings as the basis of all human actions, the theory of sensibility acquired an unusual importance among the Scottish medical community. Christopher Lawrence has argued that, by mid-century, Scottish medicine 'was characterised by its stress on the total integration of body function, the perceptive capacity or sensibility of the organism and a preoccupation with the nervous system as the structural basis for these properties'[45].

Robert Whytt, Professor of Medicine from 1747, was the first to establish at an influential level the systematic study of the nervous system as the basis of medicine in Scotland. His approach was followed by later figures such as William Cullen, Alexander Monro *secundus* and John Gregory. Although some differences can be found between them, all of them shared Whytt's concern with the operations of sensibility and the nervous system. Edinburgh physicians developed a model of the body in which sensibility, a property of the nervous system, predominated. However, Edinburgh physicians, clearly influenced by their moral philosophy counterparts, tended to use the term sympathy to refer to a 'special case of sensibility, and dependent on the same factors'. By the notion of sympathy, they referred to the communication of feeling

[44] Vila, *Enlightenment and Pathology*, p. 20 and 50-53, and Barker-Benfield, *Culture of Sensibility*, p. 6-9.

[45] Lawrence, 'The Nervous System and Society', p. 19.

between different bodily organs. Thus, using this concept, they were able to provide a physiological and anatomical basis for one of their primary concerns, the overall integration of body functioning[46].

THE NOVEL OF SENTIMENT AND THE FEMALE READER

The language of sensibility was particularly evident in the novels of sentiment, a genre which flourished across Europe in the eighteenth century and which was remarkably successful in Britain. The novel of sentiment employed the language of the medical discourse of sensibility; terms such as 'feeling', 'nerves', 'fibres', 'sensation' and 'vibrations' abounded in these novels. However, the novels of sentiment were much more than the literary counterpart of the medical ideas now circulating in Europe. They reflected the various meanings which underlay the discourse of sensibility and thus they echoed the interplay of sensibility with moral, aesthetic and gender issues. This literary genre, which enjoyed a huge success among eighteenth century readers, played a key role in the popularisation of the language and concerns of the discourse of sensibility.

In Britain, the novel of sentiment was, in a sense, a 'female novel'. Women readers contributed significantly to its success while women writers distinguished themselves in this kind of literary genre. The success of the novel should be then related to

---

[46] Lawrence, 'The Nervous System and Society', p. 27.

the rise of literacy, particularly women's, during the eighteenth century. The major increase of women's literacy in eighteenth century Britain was part of the overall increase in literacy witnessed in Europe between 1500 and 1800, especially among protestant countries. By the seventeenth century, the rate of increase of literacy among women was greater than among men. In the eighteenth century, although the gap between the sexes persisted, it was reduced significantly. It seems that, by 1750, 60% of men and 40% of women could read, female figures reaching 52% in urban areas. The growth of female readers and writers could not pass unnoticed among contemporaries, many of whom interpreted this development as competition with men and redoubled their criticisms on learned women and female pedantry[47].

The explanation for this growth lay in large part in Protestantism, which encouraged individual reading of the Bible, family readings of sacred texts and promoted the founding of schools. Economic prosperity fostered this trend. Besides the growth in charity schools and parish schools, dame schools and boarding schools for girls were established in order to provide the daughters of the rising middle classes with the fashionable accomplishments which would increase their value in the marriage market. Increasingly seen by the prosperous middle classes as signs of status and polite refinement, books became consumer items and were borrowed from the mushrooming libraries or bought to form the private collections that started to appear in the middle class households. Ladies' libraries were mainly composed of the Bible

[47] Barker-Benfield, *Culture of Sensibility*, pp. 162-163.

and religious works but among the well-to-do they also included novels, romances and plays[48].

The commercialisation of print contributed to the popularity of the printed word. Magazines, periodicals and books in different sizes, formats and prices were now available to the reading public. Those engaged in the printing business were quick to notice the rise on female readers and accordingly they addressed this new public. Class barriers to reading were brought down by circulating libraries, chapbooks, versions, subscriptions, borrowings and cheap abridgements. The increase in domestic service contributed to the spread of literacy downwards in the social scale. Some of the girls working as servants in prosperous homes were taught to read and write by their masters and in charity schools[49].

As women came to compose a wider section of the reading public, they also began to write. The eighteenth century witnessed a growing number of women writing history, treatises on education, plays, moral essays, poetry and translations of foreign books. However, excluded from the educational establishment and from scientific and scholarly learning, women turned increasingly to the novel, a literary form they could master without the support of institutionalised education. The majority of the novels published between 1692 and the end of the eighteenth century were written by women. As Barker-Benfield has put it, 'that women should come to dominate a branch of literature as soon as they became literate in large numbers was another remarkable feature of

---

[48] Barker-Benfield, *Culture of Sensibility*, pp. 160-165.

[49] Barker-Benfield, *Culture of Sensibility*, pp. 160-165.

eighteenth century history'[50]. The more famous example among these women writers was Mary Wollstonecraft, who combined her work as a critic and translator with books on political issues, women's education and sentimental novels.

The growth in literate women was noticed by the novelists themselves. Male novelists responded to the new audience of female readers, seeking to sympathise with women's taste, as proved by the figure of Richardson who sought advice about his work from a number of close female collaborators. As Barker-Benfield has suggested, women's influence as a literary audience contributed decisively not only to the best-selling figures of the sentimental novels but also to the shape of the genre itself. As a result, the novel of sentiment was keen to explore gender related issues. The sentimental novel would deal with gender relations and the workings and outcome of love in a way that could question the assumed values of the society. The novel of sentiment distinguished itself by its exploration of female sexual desire and the interplay of passion and virtue in the female self was one of its recurrent topics. By focusing on the inner word of feeling and its interrelation to the heroine's actions and fate, the novel could not avoid to explore the boundaries between feeling and passion and its implications for virtue[51].

One of the most famous images of the novel of sentiment was that of 'virtue in distress' in which the innocent and honest heroine was forced to confront male rapaciousness. The figure of

---

[50] Barker-Benfield, *Culture of Sensibility*, p. 169.

[51] Barker-Benfield, *Culture of Sensibility*.

the heroine was praised and her trials pitied and represented sympathetically. By contrast, her male opponent was usually depicted in an unfavourable light, as a rakish and immoral abductor. The image of 'virtue in distress' would most probably find the approval of many female readers. It involved a denunciation of the shortcomings of traditional definitions of masculinity through its negative male characters, which were portrayed as harsh and dominant rogues, insensitive to women's feelings. In addition, the novel of sentiment favoured new, sentimental forms of masculinity. Positive male characters were sensitive towards women's necessities and feelings, and remarkable for their heightened sense of domesticity and their fondness for the joys of a family life over traditional masculine activities; their fine sensibility endowed them with feelings of compassion and humanity and prompted them to weep and sigh, although discreetly, when facing sorrowful and moving scenes[52].

In tune with the discourse of sensibility the novel of sentiment explored many of the topics that figured prominently within it. The preservation of natural and simple virtues in the face of the corrupted world of fashion and appearances was a common theme for the sentimental novelists. Rural settings where family life and warm affections thrived were often opposed to the wicked customs of luxurious and corrupt urban life. The pleasures of domesticity were commended over the dissipate ways of the 'world'. However, the treatment of these issues could sometimes assume the more normative bias of the discourse of sensibility.

---

[52] Barker-Benfield, *Culture of Sensibility*.

Domesticity was portrayed as the natural destiny for women and as the most treasured price women could achieve by their virtue. Women's happy destiny should be sealed by marriage, without which women were left to face a worthless life fraught with dangers. By showing the heroine's interplay of passion and virtue, the novel of sentiment certainly brought into the light female sexual desire. Even so, these novels did not offer an easy resolution to the dilemmas thus raised. Family and moral duties should not be forfeited by following the dictates of sensual love while succumbing to passion would almost certainly mean the heroine's ruin.

Jean Jacques Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761) was the most influential novel of sentiment of the period. In this work, Rousseau argued for the 'natural' virtues of a domestic life, whose blessings would come, however, at a price, the sacrifice of female sexual passion. In Britain, the main representative of this genre was Samuel Richardson, whose *Pamela or Virtue Rewarded* (1740) achieved an enormous success both within and abroad. In Britain it was soon a best-seller and generated a 'Pamela rage': everyone read it and it even became a recurrent motif in mass production items such as teacups and fans. Such was its success that, in the year following its publication, it went through five editions and it was translated into French.

Pamela is told by its heroine, who shares her name with the book, through letters addressed to her parents and diary entries. Maid in waiting for an aristocratic lady, she finds herself facing the sexual advances of the heir of the state, Mr. B., once his mother dies. Pamela's resolved resistance to his approaches infuriates Mr.

B., who tricks her into believing she is to return to her parents while in fact she is sent away to another of her master's estates, where she lies captive and cut off from her family and friends[53]. In this new location Pamela's concerns for the preservation of her virtue are heightened and her different schemes to gain liberty frustrated by the housekeeper of the manor, Mrs Jewkes, who had been instructed by her master to keep a watchful eye on Pamela's actions and movements. Finally, Mr. B. arrives and tries repeatedly to subdue Pamela's resolution to preserve her innocence. After all his attempts fail, Mr. B., impressed by Pamela's virtuous behaviour, falls in love with her and, after some doubts, marries her in spite her humble social station.

Throughout the narrative, feelings are always at the forefront. Articulated through letters and Pamela's diary, the very structure of the novel points out the prominent role ascribed to feelings. Letter and diary writing undoubtedly referred to a world of inner sentiment and offered the reader the protagonist's emotions in the intimate and sincere manner that characterised both literary forms. All the characters in the novel showed a remarkable tendency to express their emotions physically and, with the exception of the meanest and thus more insensible of them, they were ready to share Pamela's distress and troubles and to express this sympathy through bodily signs. Thus, tears were often shed as Pamela recounted her miserable state or when contemplating Pamela's trials. As befitted the discourse of sensibility, not only female characters were able of such demonstrations of feeling but men

[53] Samuel Richardson, *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded* (London, 2003).

also wept and sighed recurrently in the sight of the heroine's predicament.

As the title of the novel indicates, virtue, or rather its defence, was the recurrent theme that run throughout the novel. Pamela's efforts to preserve her virtue were depicted as a life-or-death struggle. Nothing was more important to her than the preservation of her innocence, neither riches, nor status, nor even her own life. Thus, Pamela represented and embodied female virtue itself. The virtue which the book dealt with was, needless to say, sexual virtue or chastity, the first and foremost requisite of contemporary ideals of femininity.

Pamela mirrored in her conduct sentimental notions of femininity while her fate reflected its dangers. On the one hand, chastity, as the heroine argued, should be valued over everything else and over one's life. Virtue was defined as a simple and natural trait, inconsistent with the vanity or pride which, considering Pamela's outstanding beauty, also threatened her merits. On the other hand, Pamela's natural and simple virtue was set against the dangers of the 'world'. What her master demanded from Pamela, as several of the characters implied, was no more than what it had become fashionable among the well-to-do but depraved men and women of the 'world'. In addition, Pamela's virtue should be upheld against the sexual attraction she felt for her master and against the promises of riches and status that would certainly follow from her submitting to her master's wishes. *Pamela*, therefore, exemplified the main dangers that besieged female virtue: riches, sexual desire and vanity.

Pamela's stance regarding her fate was an active one. She rebels, plots and fights against the lot that has been designed for her by the wicked Mr. B. She seeks help and tries to persuade the characters of the novel to act in her defence. She resists her master's approaches both physically and by her skilled speech. Words were doubtlessly Pamela's best arms. Her writing allowed her to recount and explore her trials and became her tool in many of her attempts to free herself from her master's grasp. Eventually, it was through the reading of her 'papers' that Mr. B. came to love and respect Pamela and decided to marry her. Writing enabled Pamela to construct an embattled identity of honest virtue under threat, in a way that often resembled the trials of martyrdom and religious persecution.

Pamela has often been considered a narrative of feminine empowerment, since it explored the possibilities which writing and reading offered for the construction of the female self and, moreover, involved a denunciation of the double standard which characterised Pamela's society. *Pamela* pointed out the different standards of morality pertaining each of the sexes. While Mr. B. was free to pursue his desire, Pamela had to negotiate the attraction she felt for her master and the urgent need to remain chaste in order to claim her own dignity. In addition, the social position of each of the characters evinced the existence of a second double standard between women of different social classes. Pamela, a servant of impoverished origins, was expected to yield to her master's requests thus indicating that notions of chaste femininity only applied to women of a middle and upper social scale.

However, in spite of these challenges to the gendered and social *status quo*, Pamela was also an example of the shortcomings of the vocabulary of sensibility when applied to notions of womanhood. In order to remain innocent, Pamela showed a good deal of knowledge of the wicked ways of the world. Although initially warned by her parents about Mr. B.'s 'too generous' intentions and in spite of her young age, Pamela was perfectly able to understand her master's dishonest purposes as soon as they are hinted or subtly conveyed. Accordingly, Pamela constituted a perfect example of Mary Wollstonecraft's denunciation of the mere appearance of virtue which was demanded from the women of her time[54].

Although Pamela was often commended by her humble social origin and her natural and unaffected ways, Pamela's powers of resistance were certainly the product of her rise in the social scale as a result of her employment by a lady of rank, which enabled her to acquire her reading and writing skills and to refine the rude simplicity and disarticulation of speech which befitted a girl of such a low social station.

Pamela was also a story about the rewards that virtue deserved. Eventually Pamela would collect the well-earned recompense for her firm defence of her chastity, in the form of her marriage to Mr. B. The blessings of domesticity were the final reward of female virtue, the ultimate destiny of a virtuous and honest woman. Although by marrying 'above herself' Pamela gained riches and

---

[54] Mary Wollstonecraft, (1792) *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (Oxford, 1999).

status, these benefits were of small significance. The love of a husband and a domestic home were the most prized possessions that women of worth could expect.

In Scotland, Henry Mackenzie was the main representative of the novel of feeling. In *The Man of Feeling*, he explored the troublesome compatibility of sensibility and manliness. By confronting Harley, the sensitive hero of the novel, with the indifference and inhumanity of the world, he denounced the estrangement between true sensibility and current customs and fashions[55]. However, like most of his contemporaries, Mackenzie was concerned with the implications of sensibility for women; a theme that he explored in *Julia the Roubigné*[56].

Born in a wealthy family, now impoverished and reduced to a precarious middle class station, Julia lives in a modest property in the country, secluded from any company other than her parents'. Tormented by his economic failure, which he feels as a blow to his pride and masculine identity, and haunted by debts and further financial losses, her father finds solace and help in a newfound friend, Montauban, who soon declares his love for Julia. Although she is secretly in love with a childhood friend, Savillon, Julia finally yields to her father's desires and marries Montauban after knowing that Savillon is to be married in the West Indies. Trapped in a loveless marriage and longing for her true love, Julia lives a quiet yet unhappy existence until she knows that Savillon is back in France, unmarried, and in love with her. A meeting between the

---

[55] Henry Mackenzie, *The Man of Feeling* (London & New York, 1958).

[56] Henry Mackenzie, *Julia de Roubigné* (East Lothian, 1999).

lovers is arranged, in which they declare their feelings and lament their tragic destiny. However, Montauban, aware of this meeting and of Julia's affection for Savillon, poisons Julia, believing her to be unfaithful, and finally kills himself after having proof of Julia's innocence[57].

Julia was a heroine of sensibility whose tragic destiny set her apart from Pamela. The novel explored how an attuned sensibility could only be reached through the polish of suitable social intercourse. Isolated and lonesome, Julia's sensitive frame of mind became excessive, lacking the check of sociability and polite company. However, the main theme of the novel was the compatibility of fulfilled passion, symbolised by the love between Julia and Savillon, and social order, *i.e.* a happy and affectionate marriage. The author refused to compromise; the characters of the lovers were portrayed sympathetically while Montaubaun was represented as a stern and austere man whose passionate fit of jealousy was punished by death[58].

Even so, the novel offered no easy conciliation between sensibility and social order. Although Julia remained chaste, she had betrayed the sanctity of the domestic marital bond by uniting herself to a man she did not love and, furthermore, having feelings for another man. Her death was determined by the open declaration of her affection for Savillon as well as by her refusal to comply with the duties of a domestic wife, as conveyed to her by a letter from her mother. The novel implicitly blamed Julia's

---

[57] Mackenzie, *Julia de Roubigné.*

[58] See Rendall, 'Feminizing the Enlightenment'.

heightened and somewhat excessive sensibility for her refusal to fulfil her marital obligations. It is possible to perceive how, after her marriage, Julia's unlawful affection for Savillon grew instead of receding through her letters to her only friend, Maria, which could be interpreted as an inner dialogue since the author does not include Maria's responses. In this letters, which reflected Julia's growing infatuation with romance and romantic affection, the dangers of an unbound sensibility were explored. Eventually, Julia was punished for breaching the marital vow while Savillon was spared from Montauban's anger, which perhaps symbolised the unequal position of the sexes in front of adultery charges.

The genre of the novel of sentiment could be used to very different purposes. Mary Wollstonecraft wrote two novels, *Maria* and *The Wrongs of Woman*, which, though unfinished, were published after her death[59]. Although many features of their plot reflect Mary Wollstonecraft's living experiences and so they could be labelled as autobiographic, both novels stand firmly as representatives of the novel of sensibility since they follow many of the conventions of the genre. They include epistolary passages and their heroines, both named Maria, have most of the characteristics of the heroine of sensibility. Like Pamela and Julia, both are remarkable for their sweetness of temper, their virtues of humanity, compassion and their love of charitable actions. They are pious, fond of the simple joys of the middle station of life and suspicious of the attractions of riches and fashion. Just like Pamela

[59] Mary Wollstonecraft, *Mary and The Wrongs of Woman* (Oxford & New York, 1998).

and Julia, Wollstonecraft's two Marias possess a fair share of physical beauty; but it is their fine sensibility and virtuous disposition which entitles them to their role as heroines of sensibility.

Born in a fashionable though loveless family, the protagonist of *Maria* experiences a lonesome childhood, ignored by her frivolous mother who dotes instead on her brother. Her only comfort is her weak and impoverished friend Ann. Forced into a loveless marriage with a man she does not know and entitled to the family fortune as a result of their brother's death, Maria travels to Lisbon in an attempt to preserve Ann's health. There, she is confronted again with the frivolous nature of fashionable society and is grieved by the death of Ann. However, she meets a sensitive and tender man, Henry, and they soon develop a warm affection for each other. Back in England, Maria realises that she will never find in her husband the affinity and friendship she shares with Henry. Trapped in a loveless marriage, and after tending Henry until his death, Maria resigns herself to her fate feeling, with a certain relief, that her life would be brief and thus she will soon be released from the captivity of marriage.

The Wrongs of Woman tells the story of Maria, a woman who finds herself captive in an asylum due to the crafty arts of her husband. Though imprisoned in a cell, Maria befriends Jemima, who works in the asylum, and Henry, a sensitive gentleman, wrongly kept in the same institution in an attempt to deprive him of his fortune. Born in a well-off family, Maria's childhood is marked by the tyrannical ways of her father and the capriciousness of her mother. Once her mother dies, her father remarries a stern

and insensitive woman, who further poisons family life. In order to escape this forlorn life and having the support of her wealthy uncle, Maria marries without first realising the vile character of her husband. Being only interested in her fortune and divested of any amiable virtue, Maria's husband sinks into a life of depravity, marked by drunkenness, infidelities and ill-advised financial schemes. After her husband's attempt to exchange her sexual favours for financial support, Maria decides to leave him in spite of her pregnancy. She is hunted down by her husband who is decided to retain Maria in order to secure access to her fortune. Finally, Maria is betrayed by a servant and imprisoned in an asylum while her baby is taken away from her and dies. Eventually Maria and Henry escape the confinement and, together with Jemima, they try to start a new life together. However, it seems that Mary Wollstonecraft did not have a happy ending in mind, since the draft of the last chapters of the novel hints at Maria's betrayal by Henry and at an attempt of suicide, prevented by the thought of her unborn child.

Mary Wollstonecraft's two novels and particularly *The Wrongs of Woman* could be considered the fictional correlate of her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Through the genre of the sentimental novel Mary Wollstonecraft embarked on an exploration and denunciation of the many ills that affected women's lives and, particularly, of marriage. The destiny of her protagonists was determined by imposed marriages which prevented them from having not only a fulfilled and happy existence but also a virtuous life. Thus in *The Wrongs of Woman*, Maria's vicissitudes are intended to show the biased nature of the

marital bond, which subjected women to the tyranny of men and left them no way out whatever cruel the outcome of the union might be. Thus, the mental asylum where Maria was confined acted as a metaphor of the nature of the marriage agreement, which left women bereft of their property, children and of control over their own lives.

In *The Wrongs of Woman*, the troubled fate of women was not only exemplified by the main character but also by secondary characters like Jemima. Born out of wedlock, destitute and without the love of her parents, Jemima represented the fate of low class women, marked by their precarious access to work and defencelessness in front of the dangers of a social order dominated by men. Jemima's tale was thus an account of abuse, wretchedness and exploitation, and pointed out the double vulnerability, economic and sexual, of lower class women. In addition, Jemima's sad story emphasised another theme present in Mary Wollstonecraft novels: the crucial role of the mother in the rearing of children. Jemima's fall into debauchery was partly due to her lack of self-esteem and moral sense which, in turn, was the result of her want of maternal care and guidance. In both novels, the heroines spent their childhood in need of a tender and attentive maternal figure which tended their heightened sensibility and provided them with education.

Mary Wollstonecraft's novels involved a resolute praise of the benefits of sensibility. She devoted a lengthy passage of *Maria* to describe the nature and benefits of sensibility:

> sensibility is the most exquisite feeling of which the human soul is susceptible: when it pervades us, we feel happy; and

> could it last unmixed, we might form some conjecture of the bliss of those paradisiacal days, when the obedient passions were under the dominion of reason, and the impulses of the heart did not need correction.
>
> It is this quickness, this delicacy of feeling, which enables us to relish the sublime touches of the poet and the painter; it is this, which expands the soul, gives an enthusiastic greatness, mixed with tenderness when we view the magnificent objects of nature; or hear of a good action. (...)
>
> Sensibility is indeed the foundation of all our happiness; but these raptures are unknown to the depraved sensualist, who is only moved by what strikes his gross senses; the delicate embellishments of nature escape his notice; as do the gentle and interesting affections[60].

As this extensive quote shows, Mary Wollstonecraft subscribed to the basic tenets of the culture of sensibility. She acknowledged the close association between sensibility, virtue and a higher degree of civility, by which the soul is capable of being delighted by the charms of beauty, art and polite company. Her heroines possessed a fine sensibility which made them long for a rational education, a fulfilled life and the blessings which the social order deprived women of: property, independence and autonomy. Due to their attuned sensibility, both Marias realised the sourness of their destiny and were able to grasp the true and harsh consequences which the marital bond and the social order entailed for women. Both became rebels to their fate thanks to the enlightening powers of sensibility and reason. By contrast, lack of

[60] Wollstonecraft, *Mary and The Wrongs of Woman*, pp. 53-54.

the blessings of sensibility and an unrestrained 'sensualism' were the common traits of the novels' villains.

Mary Wollstonecraft coupled his attacks on the marital institution with a wish to reform women's reality and society, which often run along the lines of the advocates of the culture of sensibility. She denounced the frivolous and empty ways of 'the world', pointing out the harmful effects of fashionable customs over family life and the children's upbringing. In spite of her harsh criticism of marriage, she firmly advocated a domestic life as part of women's destiny. The tragic fate of her heroines was marked by the impossibility of achieve a loving, domestic union based on friendship and mutual affection rather than by the mere fact of being married. In addition, motherhood was extolled repeatedly in *The Wrongs of Woman*, not only as an essential and fulfilling female role but also in its importance for the future development of children.

When compared with other authors of sentimental novels, Mary Wollstonecraft used the vocabulary of sensibility to undermine rather than uphold current ideals of femininity. To the compliance and meekness of Pamela, Mary Wollstonecraft opposed two very different characters, both of which were determined to seek their own autonomy and aware of the trials women had to face in a society ruled by men and by 'sensualism'. The prized modesty and delicacy of Pamela, major marks of eighteenth century femininity, were equated with falsity, deception and corruption by Wollstonecraft. True sensibility, as her heroines showed, subverted this code of femininity and led to rebellion, rather than to obedience when facing masculine power.

Even so, sensibility remained a troublesome concept. In *Maria*, sensibility was coupled with weakness and eventually death, as exemplified by the fate of Henry and Maria. In *The Wrongs of Woman*, the sensitive hero of the first part of the novel, Henry, seemed to yield to baseness and infidelity as sketched in the second part. In spite of the benefits of a sensitive frame of mind, sensibility throughout the novels remained associated to illness, death and tragedy.

THE DANGERS OF SENSIBILITY

Sensibility was often praised as the source of virtue, refined behaviour, amiable social bonds and a finer appreciation of works of art and science. However, even at the height of its popularity, sensibility was also viewed by eighteenth century authors as a potentially dangerous quality. Moralists and physicians alike expressed a deep anxiety about the workings of sensibility which, together with the modern fashionable world, overcrowded urban settings and the new consumerist patterns could give way to effeminacy, nervous maladies and physical frailty[61].

Many enlightened physicians such as George Cheyne suggested that a higher degree of sensibility was connected both with great blessings and sufferings. An innate refinement of the senses betokened social and moral status, allowing the enjoyment of the subtle qualities of beauty and an appreciation of the tender attachments among fellow beings which were neglected to men of

[61] See Barker-Benfield, *Culture of Sensibility*, Carter, *Men and the Emergence of Polite Society* and Vila, *Enlightenment and Pathology*.

low social origins and scarce cultivation. However, the upper classes and those men devoted to learning and study were more susceptible to disorders of the nervous system. Lack of exercise and open spaces made the scholar easy prey to the contemporary epidemic of vapours, melancholy and feebleness which was thought to be overtaking the population of Europe[62].

Similarly, the wealthy classes were prone to nervous disorders. The rich, yielding to the temptations of luxury, had abandoned themselves to languor and idleness; they had relinquished the healthy open air pastimes for gatherings in sumptuous but crowded rooms where their nerves were intoxicated by smoking and spirits; pampered by their numerous servants, their senses were numbed by the over-refinement of their diet and lack of exercise and activity. These symptoms were particularly acute in the case of the ladies. Constantly engaged in frivolous amusements, they languished away and were prone to fits of hysteria and melancholy.

The dangers of sensibility were not only class determined but also deeply linked to particular atmospheres and milieus: namely urban life and the world of luxury and consumerism. Urban life, full of excitement and 'unnatural' stimuli could seriously endanger the fine sensibilities of men and women of rank and education who were, as a result, subjected to hypochondria, hysterical paroxysms or, at the very least, poor digestion and enfeebled offspring. Rural settings were generally commended as the best

[62] See Barker-Benfield, *Culture of Sensibility* and Vila, *Enlightenment and Pathology*.

means to avoid the harmful effects of the urban, fashionable ways of the 'world'.

Luxury and consumerism were the almost necessarily concomitants of urban life, since it was in the cities where commercial and financial wealth was generated and consumer patterns were fuelled and more easily pursued. Accordingly, London emerged as a particularly dangerous place since it was in the capital where the latest fashions sprang and the greater part of the nation's wealth was accumulated. Eighteenth century moralists soon realised the strong relation that underlay consumerism, luxury and the senses. Luxury was often related to an unregulated desire for sensual pleasure, while consumer items were thought to appeal to the senses of the consumer. In addition, the consumption of some of the most demanded products, such as tea, coffee or tobacco, was regularly criticised for its enervating effects on the nervous system.

Sensibility could also lead to another potential danger, that of falling victim to unruly passions. The moralists and physicians engaged on the study and praise of the virtues derived from sensibility were prone to stress the difference between a regulated and refined management and expression of one's feelings and the yielding to the passions which made men and women the subjects of ungovernable emotions. We have seen that many novels of sentiment explored the thin divide between the blessings of delicate, attuned feelings and the harmful effects of succumbing to sexual passion. However, sexual passion was not the only passion that could have destructive effects; luxury and consumerism were

also seen as the consequences of giving in to the passions of greed, pretentiousness and self-indulgence.

For many eighteenth century writers the main danger underlying the cult of sensibility was its apparent incompatibility with current standards of manliness. It was widely feared that the emphasis on a refined and sensitive behaviour will eventually lead to the spread of effeminacy among the masculine population. Contemporary authors attacked unregulated attempts to cultivate a reputation for refined feeling which, in their opinion, pushed men towards excessively elaborated displays of delicate, polished or sensitive behaviour[63].

Most of these apprehensions were infused with civic humanist concerns. Sensibility, commercial riches, consumption and luxury were seen as different elements belonging to the same phenomenon: the loss of the traditional stereotype of manliness, which was grounded on civic-mindedness, military fervour, landed property and patriotism. Thus, cautions against the failings which sensibility entailed for men were generally coupled with diatribes against the dangers related to commerce, rising levels of material temptation and the spread of self-interest. Preoccupation with fashionable trivia and attention to the frivolities of dress and deportment, it was often agreed, had eroded traditional male virtues such as moderation, integrity and independence. These anxieties, as we have seen, reached dramatic peaks in moments of national urgency[64].

---

[63] Carter, *Men and the Emergence of Polite Society*, pp. 124-162

[64] See Barker-Benfield, *Culture of Sensibility* and Carter, *Men and the Emergence of Polite Society*. See also chapter 2 of this PhD thesis.

Certainly, these harsh models of masculinity, inspired by republican Rome, were difficult to reconcile with the new 'man of feeling', prone to shed tears in front of fellow distress, whose main virtues were compassion, humanity and fondness for female company. The difficulties of reconciling masculinity and the refined stance advocated by the culture of sensibility could be exemplified by the fate of the main character of Henry Mackenzie's novel *The Man of Feeling*. In this novel, the protagonist was a man of an upper-middle social station living in the countryside, whom the management of his patrimony forced to travel to London. Endowed with a humane, compassionate and sensitive frame of mind, the hero was tricked several times by the crafty and cunning men of the 'world' and did not fail to pity the fate of an unfortunate lady, led by a amorous disappointment to prostitution. Similarly, he exerted himself to provide for one of his faithful servants whom ill-fate had left destitute and with two grandchildren to care for. All of these instances of human suffering led to recurrent weeping and sighs. Although his demonstrations of fellow feeling attracted the attention of the lady he loved, eventually the hero died (affected by too much feeling, one would say), his love unfulfilled, thus inadvertently proving the difficulty of bringing together sensibility and manliness[65].

Some authors, such as Shaftesbury, sought to counteract the dangers of an over-sensitised stance in a consumer society by calling for stoic virtues and the primacy of reason. Effeminacy, according to him, was an emasculate state where the self was led to

[65] Mackenzie, *The Man of Feeling*.

cowardice and coyness by an excessive pursuit of material pleasure and the spread of luxury. In commercial societies, he argued, polite conversation and the company of women produced a relaxation of the mind and fibres which was contrary to the manly activities of the patriotic citizen. To prevent this, the mind should be subordinate to the dictates of reason so that the humane and tender tendencies would thrive without rendering the person too soft and effeminate. The disciplining of the passions and emotions should be coupled with the stoic virtues of moderation, self-control and composure in order to achieve a harmonious equilibrium and a manly poised frame of mind[66].

Within Scotland, Adam Ferguson was remarkable for his civic humanist stance and his concerns about the decay of patriotism, manly civic mindedness and public duty as a result of commercialisation, the division of labour and polite refinement. Adam Smith was also concerned with the compatibility of sensibility and manliness in his *Treatise of Moral Sentiments*. Accordingly, his praise of the 'feminine', 'softer virtues' of humanity went hand in hand with an equal recommendation of the 'male', 'great virtues' of courage and self-command. In addition, the 'impartial spectator', an interiorised sense which should judge own and other's actions, was conceived as a male figure, consisting in the internalisation of a set of typically masculine virtues: power, control, reason and strength. Similarly, Hugh Blair was aware of the apparent contradictions between sensibility and masculinity and thus remarked that 'frequently, under a negligent and

[66] Barker-Benfield, *Culture of Sensibility*, pp. 110-117.

seemingly rough manner, there lies a tender and feeling heart. Manliness and sensibility are so far from being incompatible that the truly bare are for the most part generous and humane; while the soft and effeminate are hardly capable of any vigorous exertion of affection'[67].

However, there were authors who refused to draw an obvious connexion between commercial success, refinement and effeminacy. In England, Bernard Mandeville praised the economic achievements of his day and commended self-interest as the source of progress and economic growth. Among the authors of the Scottish Enlightenment, David Hume stood out in his defence of commercial success and politeness, denying that political corruption should necessarily follow socio-economic improvement. Thus, in his essay 'Of Refinement in the Arts' he remarked that 'luxury, when excessive, is the source of many ills, but is generally preferable to sloth and idleness, which would commonly succeed in its place, and are more hurtful both to private persons and to the public'[68].

---

[67] On the difficulties of reconciling manliness and sensibility, see Barker-Benfield, *Culture of Sensibility*, Carter, *Men and the Emergence of Polite Society*, Dwyer, *The Age of the Passions* and Dwyer, *Virtuous Discourse.* Adam Ferguson, (1767 ed.) *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (Edinburgh, 1966). On Adam Smith see Vivienne Brown, '"Mere Inventions of the Imagination". A Survey of Recent Literature on Adam Smith', *Economics and Philosophy*, 13, (1997), pp. 281-312, Edith Kuiper, 'The Construction of a Masculine Identity in Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*', in Drucilla Barker, K. and Edith Kuiper (eds.), *Toward a Feminist Philosophy of Economics* (London & New York, 2003), pp. 145-161 and Jane Rendall, 'Virtue and Commerce: Women in the Making of Adam Smith's Political Economy', in Ellen Kennedy and Susan Mendus (eds.), *Women in Western Political Philosophy* (Brighton, 1987). Blair, *Sermons*.

[68] See Barker-Benfield, *Culture of Sensibility*, Hume, *Selected Essays*, p. 177 and Carter, *Men and the Emergence of Polite Society*.

WOMEN IN THE DISCOURSE OF SENSIBILITY

Although the notion of sensibility emerged linked to medical and psychoperceptual theories which were apparently gender blind, as the discourse of sensibility unfolded throughout the century, it became progressively associated with women's qualities and definitions of femininity. Moreover, the discourse of sensibility came to be commonly used in order to articulate constructions of femininity which, more often than not, emphasised women's inferiority and their intrinsic private role. Even so, the fluid boundaries of the very notion of sensibility allowed different interpretations of its relevance regarding women, and thus, it could be also possible to vindicate women's worth and equality on the same grounds on which women's subordination was endorsed.

Environmental psychology, as outlined by Locke, offered a solid ground to argue for women's equality. If all human minds were born as if they were blank sheets of paper, then, there was not a natural superiority of men over women regarding intellectual powers and, moreover, women's minds, just like men's, could be cultivated with maximum advantage. For some, like Mary Wollstonecraft, Locke's theories provided the scientific proof that women had been deprived of their due intellectual worth by lack of education and custom. In her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, she added up this argument to the traditional claim on the equality

of the souls in order to demand the equality of women and their access to the same education as men[69].

However, when dealing with sensibility and the nervous system, most writers reached the reverse conclusion and naturalised women's subordination and private role on the basis of their softer, finer sensibility. Soon in the century, physicians and moralists alike argued that women had naturally a more delicate nervous system and therefore a greater sensibility than men. It was believed that, however delicate a man's nervous system could be, it was still firmer than a woman's. A weaker frame of mind and a finer sensibility were considered natural in women since it befitted other observed 'natural' feminine attributes. Since ancient times, women had been associated with nervous disorders, particularly hysteria. It was common knowledge in the eighteenth century that women's physical constitution was weaker and more delicate than men's and, in addition, women had been traditionally associated with compassion, humanity and gentleness, attributes arising from a sensitive character[70].

Medical experts declared that women, unlike men, were born deficient. Their 'spirits' were inherently less than men's and their nerves were thinner, more delicate and softer. Women's constitution was, as a consequence, permeated by this weakness, their physical delicacy reflecting the frailty of their nervous system. In addition, such fragility explained why women were unfit for elaborate thoughts and studies. While some education should be

[69] See Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication.*

[70] Barker-Benfield, *Culture of Sensibility*, Rendall, 'Feminizing the Enlightenment', Van Sant, *Eighteenth Century Sensibility* and Vila, *Enlightenment and Pathology.*

bestowed upon women's feeble minds – the so-called accomplishments –, women were thought to lack the steadiness of thought which was necessary for the most abstract and complicated subjects such as science, philosophy and classical knowledge. French, needlework, dancing and domestic economy should occupy women's education not only because the future domestic course of their lives recommended it but also because they were unfit for more serious studies[71].

Another consequence of women's nervous delicacy was their greater tendency to be carried away by the passions. Passions such as anger, joy, fear or grief made stronger impressions upon their feeble nerves and therefore, women were easily overcome by them. As a result, they suffered not only psychologically, showing greater nervous distress and less restraint in their joy, but also physically. Their bodily expression of the passions was more violent and less measured while their physical constitution suffered from the exertions of their nervous fibres[72].

It was not strange, then, that women suffered from nervous disorders in greater numbers than men. Weaker physical and psychological constitution contributed to make women particularly prone to fits of melancholy and hysteria. Female inherent susceptibility could be worsened by bad diet, idleness and lack of exercise, factors that seemed to be particularly pertinent due to modern lifestyle and the increase of wealth. In fact, in most analysis of women's tendency to nervous disorders underlay an

[71] Barker-Benfield, *Culture of Sensibility*, Rendall, 'Feminizing the Enlightenment', Van Sant, *Eighteenth Century Sensibility* and Vila, *Enlightenment and Pathology*.

[72] Barker-Benfield, *Culture of Sensibility*.

association between psychological maladies, femininity and consumerism[73].

Women were often accused of having a greater appetite for the new products of mass consumption such as tea, coffee, sugar and chocolate which, in turn, were blamed for contributing to female vulnerability in front of nervous illness. In addition, it was thought that due to women's greater sensibility external objects caused stronger impressions upon the female mind. Accordingly, it was considered that consumer's produce held a stronger appeal on women. Female disorders were frequently related to the feminine craze for the latest fashions and to their fondness for the refined pleasures of the new spa towns. This implicit association between women and consumerism could be related to the prominent role played by the household as the main recipient of most of the articles of mass consumption. However, it also belied the real and precarious position of women in front of the new society of consumption, since women, lacking property or earnings of their own, had only a difficult access to the pleasures of mass consumption[74].

The possession of a finer and greater sensibility led to an identification between women and sensibility itself. Accordingly, the virtues arising from sensibility, *i.e.* humanity, sympathy and tenderness, were deemed to constitute the very essence of femininity. However, on the same grounds, women were also associated with the dangers of sensibility. We have seen how

[73] Barker-Benfield, *Culture of Sensibility*.

[74] Barker-Benfield, *Culture of Sensibility*.

women were singled out as particularly prone to be affected by the nervous disorders that often accompanied a sensitive mind. Moreover, nervous weakness and disorders were generally represented as an overbalance on the feminine side. Likewise, the vices which were thought to follow the excesses of sensibility in a modern age were characterised as 'effeminacy', as we have seen regarding the loss of patriotism and the decline of the heroic virtues of which commercial societies were blamed by some authors.

In spite of the great praises bestowed upon the achievement of an attuned sensibility, women's superiority over men in this respect hardly led to the recognition of women's equality. Even so, women could also be praised as a result of their greater sensibility. Women's humanity, compassion and natural capacity for tenderness made them particularly suitable for the domestic life they were intended to. Their finer sensibility and capacity to sympathise allowed them to deal with the putatively rougher and more severe character of their husbands. In addition, a sensitive frame of mind was necessary to form the tender attachment between a mother and her children. Moreover, this especial sensibility was an essential requirement of femininity since modesty, delicacy and diffidence were the basic characteristics by which women were loved and esteemed by men. As John Gregory put it, 'the extreme sensibility that blushing indicated may be a weakness and encumbrance in our sex... but in yours it is peculiarly engaging'. As this paragraph shows, the praises earned by women due to their sensibility were peculiar to their sex and were not to be shared by men. Instead of being conductive to equality, female

sensibility marked women's difference and their dissimilar position in society[75].

Nevertheless, women's peculiar sensibility was also praised in more generous terms. Within the Scottish Enlightenment, the assumption that women's tender character would improve men's unrefined faculties, eventually leading to the improvement and progress of the manners of society as a whole, became commonplace. The company of women, it was believed, was a key instrument of civilisation, since polite conversation with women would instil in men the virtues of humanity, compassion and sympathy, softening men's nature, rougher and more prone to violent, asocial passions. In this respect, women emerged as prominent actors in the new public sphere of polite conversation and debate, lessening the strong identification between women, family and the domestic realm of the household. Similarly, women were pictured not only as agents of civilisation but also as a moral force by virtue of their finer sensibility[76].

In his essay 'Of the Rise of the Arts and Sciences' Hume advocated the blessings of politeness, refinement and sensibility as marks of improvement and civilisation, remarking that the company of women was essential to bring about the advantages of civility. Besides, he stated,

> what better school for manners than the company of virtuous women, where the mutual endeavour to please must insensibly polish the mind, where the example of the

---

[75] Rendall, 'Feminizing the Enlightenment', John Gregory, (1774 ed.) *A Father's Legacy to his Daughters* (New York & London, 1974).

[76] See chapter 3 of this PhD thesis.

> female softness and modesty must communicate itself to their admirers, and where the delicacy of that sex puts every one on his guard, lest he give offence by any breach of decency?[77].

However, neither women's insertion in the public sphere by these means was complete nor was women's moral stance equal to men's. On the one hand, the very culture of sensibility which defined women as agents of improvement by bestowing the polish of sensibility over men was also restricting the circle of the company in which this influence should be exerted. By condemning the false and frivolous amusements of the 'world', the discourse of sensibility was calling for a more secluded sphere in which the pleasures of conversation and polite company should be conducted. The praise of the benefits of female company went hand in hand with a move towards a more retired sociability, centred in the family and a select circle of friends within the quiet retreat of the home.

On the other hand, the moral force of women's peculiar virtues did not entitle them to the public sphere of politics and the marketplace. The virtues which, according to the tradition of civic humanism, determined access to the political arena were those of the classical republican citizenship: the courage of the warrior, the ardour of the patriot and the stoic virtues of self-command and sacrifice. Although it was desirable for women to acquire these intrinsic masculine virtues, it was not necessary for them to possess them and very few authors believed that women could

---

[77] Hume, *Selected Essays*, p. 74.

really master the stern virtues of the stoic tradition. It was rather believed that women's nature did not fit the requirements of patriotism and civic mindedness. Even if in an attempt to reconcile the civic humanist tradition with the characteristics of the new commercial societies, many authors, such as Adam Smith, detached the practice of virtue from the public sphere of politics and the marketplace, introducing the virtue of humanity as a basic requirement for social progress and harmony, none of them was ready to grant women the political privileges that men enjoyed.

Accordingly, the moral realm of women was mostly restricted by the boundaries of the home or, at best, by the protected and secluded contours of polite company. Among some authors, their firm beliefs regarding female nature neglected the possibility of women's decided commitment to the often hard demands of the state; for others, the weight of past traditions was strong enough to consider women valid political actors. In certain cases, the necessity of preserving the private realm of the family from the dangerous influence of the 'world' was alleged against a female full public role, while in others, the need of keeping some distance between the sexes to avoid the potential corruption of the sexual mores was argued. These arguments prevented eighteenth century authors from offering to women a role in politics which equalled the public relevance they had been conceded in the polite salons.

Therefore, the two strands of opinion, Gregory's prescriptive stance and the Scottish theorists of human progress belief in women's public role, agreed on emphasising women's distinctive private qualities. Women's role within the family was the primary

and most natural female duty and women's moral influence was better exerted from the quiet haven of the home.

CONDUCT LITERATURE AND ALEXANDER'S *HISTORY OF WOMEN*. CHANNELLING FEMININE SENSIBILITY

Conduct books have been defined as a form of literature aimed at describing (or prescribing) socially approved codes of femininity. By counselling women about their duties and pastimes, giving advice about courtship, and encouraging the features (both physical and psychological) which would be valued in the marriage market, conduct literature contributed significantly to establish eighteenth century standards of femininity. Typical of conduct literature was the confounding of 'natural' gender qualities with socially constructed definitions of womanhood which were embodied by the figures of the dutiful daughter, submissive wife and loving mother. Similarly, particular forms of femininity, notably the irresponsible, the over-refined, the ungovernable, the under- or over-educated, were criticised as 'unnatural' and unacceptable[78].

[78] See Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction. A Political History of the Novel* (Oxford & New York, 1986), Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse, 'The Literature of Conduct, the Conduct of Literature and the Politics of Desire. An Introduction', in Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse (eds.), *The Ideology of Conduct* (London & New York, 1987), pp. 1-24, Vivien Jones, 'The Seductions of Conduct: Pleasure and Conduct Literature', in Roy Porter and Marie Mulvey Roberts (eds.), *Pleasure in the Eighteenth Century.* (London, 1996), pp. 108-132, Mary Catherine Moran, *From Rudeness to Refinement. Gender, Genre and Scottish Enlightenment* (unpublished PhD thesis, 1999), pp. 112-150, and Kathryn Sutherland, 'Writings on Education and Conduct. Arguments for Female Improvement', in Vivien Jones (ed.), *Women and Literature in Britain* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 25-45.

However, some authors have pointed out that conduct literature endorsed an epitome of femininity which was currently threatened by a lively debate on women's rights and nature, by social practices and by the plots of literary genres such as the novel. In addition, conduct books could be read differently and their message could be interiorised as well as contested. The reading of conduct books could lead to rebellion against the standards of femininity they tried to enforce or, at least, foster the debate about the meanings, characteristics and duties of femininity. Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* constituted a good example of a critical reading of conduct literature. In this book, Wollstonecraft analysed the more popular conduct books of her day, Rousseau's *Émile*, Fordyce's *Sermons to Young Women*, John Gregory's *A Father's Legacy to his Daughters*, Hester Chapone's *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind* and Lord Chesterfield's *Letters*. One by one, Wollstonecraft demolished the arguments of these writers, denouncing the moral double standard and the 'naturalisation' of culturally accepted female archetypes which underlay their arguments. She deemed only Chapone's book worthy of praise and respect[79].

Eighteenth century conduct literature for women enjoyed an unprecedented success. During this century, the publication of conduct books for women surpassed in quantity and variety those directed to men, many of them becoming best-sellers, as was the case of John Gregory's *A Father's Legacy*. However, conduct books

[79] See Jones, 'The Seductions of Conduct' and Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication*, pp. 150-190.

were not new in the eighteenth century. They were part of an unbroken tradition of instruction books which extended from the Middle Ages to the present day. The genre encompassed many variants, which were favoured according to the taste of the time. There were devotional manuals, intended for the aristocracy; courtesy books directed to would-be court ladies; domestic economies for bourgeois women and books on polite demeanour that would be read by women from middle class and gentry backgrounds[80].

During the Middle Ages, devotional books were favoured. They addressed the ladies from the aristocracy and thus, focused on issues of birth, title, political authority and blood as marks of female desirability. The ideal of femininity outlined in these books resembled the image of the Virgin Mary within the religious tradition; a pious, meek and sweet tempered female yet distant and almost out of reach. The late Middle Ages witnessed the emergence of a different type of conduct book, which was drawn as a response to the rise of bourgeois interests and whose influence would be felt throughout the following centuries. It portrayed a different standard of femininity. Active, hospitable and involved in the household chores, it was a type of woman more akin to Martha, Lazarus's sister in the Gospel. The new female represented in these books had clear political implications. By favouring an ideal of womanhood in stark contrast to the aristocratic one, the bourgeoning middle classes were using this

[80] See Armstrong and Tennenhouse, 'The Literature of Conduct'.

alternative image of womanhood to assert their own distinctive identity as opposed to that of the aristocracy[81].

The divide between aristocratic and non-aristocratic styles permeated conduct literature during the following centuries. In the Renaissance, devotional and courtesy books perpetuated an elevated, patrician ideal of womanhood which was used, in turn, to assert the nobility's claims to political and socio-economic authority. Aristocratic women were both supremely desirable and unavailable, much like the aristocratic status itself. Bearers and embodiments of the blood ties upon which aristocratic hierarchies were constructed, aristocratic women were political icons emphasising the attractions of the power of the nobility and the necessity of keeping aristocratic blood lines closed and pure. Thus, women were portrayed as unassailable in their utmost chastity and modesty, and almost devoid of sexual desire, which would be contrary to the aristocratic practice of marrying for reasons of power and preservation of the title[82].

At the same time, in the early modern period, puritan instruction books, rooted in a different ethos, offered different models of femininity and family. They opposed an embryonic notion of domesticity to the obsession with genealogy which characterised the wealthy, yet corrupted and destitute of warm affections, aristocratic families. Puritan prescriptive literature emphasised the role of the family in the moral and religious probity of the individual. The family was conceived as a self-

[81] See Armstrong and Tennenhouse, 'The Literature of Conduct'.

[82] See Armstrong and Tennenhouse, 'The Literature of Conduct'.

enclosed unit, ruled by the pious but firm authority of the father over which the state should not attempt to intervene. Within this severe family order, gender differences were considered God-determined and unbridgeable, and conceived in oppositional terms: men and women were to embody the active and passive versions of the same attributes. Accordingly, women's subordinate role was advocated just as male authority was enforced[83].

In the eighteenth century the genre underwent further changes. While books upholding the aristocratic ideal fell off popularity, a new type of conduct book emerged along the lines of the bourgeois domestic economies and the puritan instruction books, conveniently refashioned to suit a fully commercial and less rigorous society. As Nancy Armstrong has remarked, the eighteenth century witnessed 'the production of a new object of desire that – for the first time in history – represented the interests of those in the middle ranks of society'[84].

In a mobile society where the middle classes occupied a vague social niche, the conduct book catered for those aiming at belonging to the 'polite society' and set the rules to triumph in a marriage market which encompassed the 'respectable classes'. Conduct literature addressed a readership comprising various levels and sources of income, which included virtually all people who distinguished themselves from the aristocracy, on the one hand, and from the labouring poor, on the other. Accordingly, as Nancy Armstrong has argued, the conduct book provided the

[83] See Armstrong and Tennenhouse, 'The Literature of Conduct' and Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, pp. 61-63.

[84] Armstrong and Tennenhouse, 'The Literature of Conduct', p. 10.

different groups belonging to the nascent middle classes with a strong element of common identity and thus it could be said that 'it was the new domestic woman rather than her counterpart, the new economic man, who first encroached upon aristocratic culture and seized authority from it'[85]. However, the influence of conduct literature was not restricted to the middle classes. Their popularity and their conscious appeal to a wide readership determined that the ideal of womanhood they proposed cut across class differences and came to be representative of eighteenth century notions of femininity.

Conduct literature embodied a middle class, socially open ethos which directly opposed the false and deceiving ways of the aristocracy while upholding a pattern of femininity which certainly took some of its elements from former puritan archetypes. Religion, industry, morality, the private sphere and domesticity were associated with an epitome of femininity which was also defined by current perceptions and ideas of womanhood. Aristocratic women were portrayed as beings that wandered in sensuality and idle occupations. Concerned only with appearances and material trifles, noble women lacked the psychological depth and moral probity which were praised as the core of the current ideal of femininity.

The vocabulary of sensibility played an important role in the refashioning of the 'new woman' portrayed in conduct literature. Like in medical texts and in the sentimental novels, women were closely associated with the notion of sensibility. Thus, differences

[85] Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, p. 59.

between women and men were supposed to be rooted in their different psychological traits, as determined by their dissimilar relation to the workings of sensibility, rather than by their distinctive physical constitutions. Due to their heightened sensibility women were conceived as creatures of feeling, endowed with humanity, compassion and tenderness. While independence and self-command were regarded as the defining traits of the male, modesty and chastity emerged as the most valuable virtues women should have. As a result, women appeared to be naturally inclined to household management and to care for the sick, needy and young. Even if physical differences did not figure prominently in prescriptive definitions of femininity, weakness and delicacy were often invoked as part of the ideal of femininity, together with the maternal role.

Conduct literature in the eighteenth century included different styles and genres. Prescriptive advice on women's behaviour, virtues and duties could be found in the form of letters, such as Hester Chapone's *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind*, sermons, such as Fordyce's *Sermons to Young Women*, or parental advice, such as Gregory's *Legacy to his Daughters* or Lord Halifax's *Advice to a Daughter*. Other texts reflected in their title their prescriptive nature as in the case of Maria Edgeworth's *Practical Education* or Erasmus Darwin's *A Plan for the Conduct of Female Education in Boarding Schools*. These texts were supplemented by magazines, such as *The Female Spectator*, which often included guidelines about behaviour, conversation and household management. In addition, there were domestic economies, more practical in their tone, which offered the reader advice on household duties, ranging from management

of the servants to the correct and wise spending of the domestic economic allotment[86].

Other genre where prescription surfaced regularly was the novel. Thus, in *Pamela*, the newly-wed heroine was soon given by her husband precise instructions, which included how to best please him, how to manage her domestic duties and how to deal with her charity endeavours. Similarly, in *Julia de Roubigné* the protagonist treasured a letter from her deceased mother in which the duties and character of a tender and dutiful wife were explained to her. Both texts, then, considered important to lie down the principles which ought to rule a good wife's behaviour and stressed the importance of obeying and pleasing the husband as the touchstone of marital happiness.

Both novels portrayed an ideal type of femininity similar to that of conduct literature. Pamela was clearly a role model for women to follow while, in the case of Julia, prescriptive advice was given by showing what should not be done, the mistakes of the heroine underlining what the perfect wife should never do. By contrast, Mary Wollstonecraft's novels undermined the kind of advice found in conduct literature. The main characters of both novels gained their status of heroines due to their rebellion against the accepted code of femininity which, based on a mistaken understanding of sensibility, stressed modesty, chastity and

---

[86] See Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, Armstrong and Tennenhouse, 'The Literature of Conduct' and Vivien Jones, *Women in the Eighteenth Century: Constructions of Femininity* (London & New York, 1990).

dissimulation over the more sincere and simpler virtues derived from true sensibility[87].

Thus, although William Alexander's *History of Women* belonged fully to the category of conjectural history, it was also pervaded by a prescriptive tone which justifies its inclusion under the label of conduct literature. In fact, several of its chapters were devoted to issues and concerns which constituted the principal themes of eighteenth century conduct books. In the first volume, the chapters 'Of Female Education', 'Of the Employments and Amusements of Women' and 'Of the Character and Conduct of Women' could be considered as pieces of prescriptive literature. The same could be said of the chapters 'Of Delicacy and Chastity', 'Of Dress, Ornament and Some Other Methods Whereby Women Endeavour to Render Themselves Agreeable to the Men', 'Of Courtship', and 'Of Matrimony' in the second volume. These chapters combined in variable degrees conjectural material about past and contemporary societies with suggestions and guidance about the readers' most desirable behaviour and had a distinctive didactic flavour. Accordingly, as Catherine Moran has suggested, this 'intersection of conduct literature and conjectural history' was one of the main characteristics of William Alexander's book[88].

In order to explore the *History of Women*'s prescriptive nature, it is helpful to proceed to a comparison between this book and

---

[87] Richardson, *Pamela*, Mackenzie, *Julia de Roubigné* and Wollstonecraft, *Mary and The Wrongs of Woman.*

[88] William Alexander, (1782 ed.) *The History of Women. From the Earliest Antiquity to the Present Time* (Bristol, 1995), Vol. 1 & 2 and Moran, *From Rudeness to Refinement*, p. 211.

John Gregory's *A Father's Legacy to his Daughters*, which is perhaps the canonical eighteenth century conduct text due to the status of the writer and to the success of the book.

John Gregory's book opened with a statement of the familiar, affectionate nature of his intentions. Out of his loving concern as a father, Gregory wanted to furnish his daughters with a collection of advice on the 'life and manners' they were about to embark on as a result of their passage from childhood to womanhood. The first chapter was devoted to religion, which the author considered particularly appropriate to women due to the peculiar sensibility of female nature. The second chapter, on conduct and behaviour, dealt with the differences between female and male character, extolling the female virtues of modesty and chastity while warning against the slightest trace of vanity and ostentation. Regarding amusements, the third chapter recommended some exercise to prevent ill-health, reading, charity works and some education, alerting at the same time against the ills of pedantry, idleness and fashionable accomplishments. In the last chapter on friendship, love and marriage, Gregory carefully warned his daughters against the many perils of courtship and friendship with men, and praised the countless joys of a domestic marriage, based on friendship and affection[89].

Gregory's and Alexander's works had many features in common. From the beginning of his book, Gregory stated the private, domestic nature of his enterprise. He did not want to appear as a disengaged and severe figure. Instead, he portrayed

[89] Gregory, *A Father's Legacy*.

himself as a loving parent whose concern for the welfare of his children prompted him to put his thoughts in writing. Gregory talked of his 'father's fondness' and frequently recalled affectionately the memory of his deceased wife. As Mary Wollstonecraft remarked in her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 'paternal solicitude pervades Dr. Gregory's *Legacy to his Daughters*', a book written with an 'easy and familiar style' and infused with 'melancholy tenderness'[90].

This conscious and recurring determination to appear as a domestic paternal figure permeated the book and should be deemed essential to the main task the author had set his mind on. By portraying himself as a domestic father, Gregory was employing the vocabulary of sensibility in order to gain the trust and the sympathy of the reader. The author depicted himself as a caring father and a loving husband whose reflections on female virtue and duties sprang from a virtuous, feeling heart rather than from parental authority. Thus, the author was able to appear as a man of sensibility, a sympathetic figure detached from the multitude of rakes and immoral men who only had in mind the corruption of the female self. Although, being a doctor and a university professor, Gregory could have chosen to appear as an erudite, authoritative figure whose judgement should be followed on account of his superior knowledge, he preferred to turn to the language of sensibility and root his authority in his refined sensibility, as befitted a family man.

---

[90] See Gregory, *A Father's Legacy* and Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication*, p. 171.

The constant remarks on the fondness of his feelings for his daughters allowed the reader to trust the author and to interiorise without apprehension the message of the book. This empathetic bond was further strengthened by the author's feeling, sensitive stance. The author detached himself from the numberless sensualists and libertines, who only wished to spoil and take advantage of women's innocence, against whom he warned throughout the book. As the author remarked in the introduction, 'you will hear, at least for once in your lives, the genuine sentiments of a man who has no interest in flattering or deceiving you'[91]. The author emerged as a man of feeling, endowed with the sensitive virtues of humanity, compassion and good will, who deserved to be trusted and whose advice should not be questioned but accepted.

As we have seen, when writing his book, Alexander had primarily in mind the models of conjectural history and natural history and, accordingly, he regularly portrayed himself as an 'impartial observer of human nature', that is, as an objective and scientific writer. First and foremost, Alexander identified himself with the standards set by conjectural historians in order to validate his authority and obtain the trust and respect of the reader.

Even so, just as prescription and conjectural history were joined in his enterprise, impartiality and sensibility were both used to support his competence for the task. Thus, in the twelfth chapter, the third part 'Of the Character and Conduct of Women', he declared that, in writing the book he had 'only in view the

[91] Gregory, *A Father's Legacy*, p. 6.

improvement of their understandings [of women] and leading them by gentle arts to those paths of rectitude and decorum, from which some of them have deviated'[92]. This quote points out the prescriptive nature of the work and at the same time suggests Alexander's attempt to appear as a sensitive author, endowed with the virtues arising from sensibility. He speaks of his desire of using 'gentle arts' rather than rational arguments and remarks his intention of fostering female virtues, in a way, as we will see, fully consistent with the current vocabulary of sensibility. In addition, Alexander frequently portrayed himself as an author endowed with the virtues of humanity and compassion, feelings he often expressed when reviewing the cruelty women had been subjected to and the debauched customs of savage peoples[93].

Although Alexander and Gregory employed the vocabulary of sensibility to back their claims to authorship, there were differences between both authors. Alexander could not depict himself as a loving father or mainly as a man of sensibility, as Gregory did, because of the mixed nature of his enterprise. Since his book was a compound of conjectural history and conduct literature in which the conjectural elements prevailed over the latter, Alexander was impelled to appear principally as an impartial, erudite author and only secondarily, as a man of feeling.

Alexander's *History of Women* contained many of the common themes present in the culture of sensibility and also in Gregory's *Legacy*. Like Gregory, Alexander depicted women according to the

---

92 Alexander, *History of Women, I*, pp. 463-464.

93 See for instance Alexander, *History of Women, I*, p. 417 and p. 437.

most unfavourable bias of the culture of sensibility. While Gregory wrote on the 'superior delicacy' of women and the 'natural softness and sensibility of [their] dispositions', Alexander remarked the 'acute feelings both of body and mind' which were characteristic of the female sex[94].

Alexander shared the connections made by several authors and physicians, of which he was certainly aware of, between female finer sensibility, nervous disorders and lesser reasoning powers. The witch hunting frenzy which characterised the early modern era was, in his opinion, the product of a misunderstanding of the characteristics of female nature. It was not that women were prone to witchcraft and to be possessed by the devil. Rather, nervous disorders, a common affliction in women, had been mistaken for possessions by evil spirits. 'So delicate is the sensibility or rather irritability of the female constitution', he declared, 'that the sex are thereby subjected to several diseases, whose symptoms and appearances are more extraordinary than those which the men are commonly afflicted'[95].

Later on, in the same chapter, Alexander argued for the incompatibility between female acute sensibility and strong reason and efforts of the mind:

> it has been alleged against women, that they are incapable of attending to, or at least deaf to reason and conviction. This, however, we venture to affirm, is an error of partiality, or inattention; for the generality of women can reason in a cool and candid manner on any subject, where none of their interests or passions are concerned; *but such*

[94] Gregory, *A Father's Legacy*, p. 10 and Alexander, *History of Women, I*, p. 301.

[95] Alexander, *History of Women, II*, p. 93.

> *appears to be the acuteness of the female feelings, that wherever passion is opposed to reason, it operates so strongly, that every reasoning power and faculty is, for a time, totally suspended.* The same thing, to a lesser degree, happens to men; and the only difference between the sexes, in this particular, arises from the different degrees of feeling and sensibility[96].

Alexander also echoed the association between women's finer sensibility and their propensity to be more deeply influenced by material attractions and pleasurable activities. He pointed out 'the levities, the expensive follies, the irrestrainable [sic] propensity to pleasure observable in the other sex'[97].

Like Gregory, Alexander connected the finer sensibility of the female sex with a set of virtues, *i.e.* chastity, delicacy and modesty, which were peculiar to women and defined the standard of womanhood. In the chapter on 'Conduct and Behaviour', Gregory stated that 'one of the chief beauties in a female character is that modest reserve, that retiring delicacy, which avoids the public eye and is disconcerted even at the gaze of admiration'. Alexander certainly agreed with Gregory's opinion. Regarding delicacy, Alexander wrote 'of all the virtues which adorn the female character, and enable the sex to steal imperceptibly into the heart, none are more conspicuous than that unaffected timidity and shyness of manners which we distinguish by the name of delicacy'. Such was the value that Alexander ascribed to delicacy that he linked the achievement of this virtue with the preservation of chastity: 'delicacy is the sentinel that is placed over female virtue

---

[96] Alexander, *History of Women, II*, p. 100 (my italics).

[97] Alexander, *History of Women, I*, p. 325.

and that centinel [sic] once overcome, chastity is more than half subdued'[98].

Alexander and Gregory considered that the attainment of female delicacy and modesty was not only a matter of inner virtue but also depended on external behaviour and appearances. Gregory devoted the main part of his chapter on 'Conduct and Behaviour' to review the importance of gesture and demeanour for female modesty:

> this modesty, which I think so essential in your sex, will naturally dispose you to be rather silent in company, especially in a larger one (...). I should be glad that you had an easy dignity in your behaviour at public places, but not that confident ease, that unabashed countenance, which seems to set the company at defiance (...). Converse with men even of the first rank with that dignified modesty, which may prevent the approach of the most distant familiarity[99].

Gregory's set of rules could not agree more with Alexander's remarks about the nature of female modesty in Western countries, which he deemed one of the marks of the progress of civilisation and politeness. Northern countries, 'not satisfied that their women should refrain from real unchastity only, they would not even allow of any thing that had the slightest appearance of indecorum, or that might raise improper ideas in the mind'[100].

Therefore, for Alexander and Gregory, modesty, delicacy and their principal outcome, chastity, were based on inner virtue and

---

[98] Gregory, *A Father's Legacy*, p. 26, Alexander, *History of Women, II*, p. 1 and p. 5.

[99] Gregory, *A Father's Legacy*, pp. 28-30.

[100] Alexander, *History of Women, II*, p. 42.

external niceties alike. This emphasis on the appearance of virtue could be linked to the premises of the culture of sensibility. Due to their finer sensibility, women were prone to be carried out by their passions and their acute feelings. In order to counteract the negative effects of such enhanced sensibility, women should show a restraint of both body and mind which prevented their feelings from taking hold over the female self, thus endangering virtue.

A calm and reserved outward demeanour was an important part of the behavioural codes of the culture of sensibility and politeness. The pleasures of refined conversation and sociability and the workings of sympathy were thought to be endangered by exaggerated gestures and vehement speech. However, although a controlled demeanour was demanded from both sexes, men's virtue was not challenged by unpolished and rough manners. As we have seen, Hugh Blair had remarked regarding men that 'frequently, under a negligent and seemingly rough manner, there lies a tender and feeling heart'. The same could not be said about women. Inattention to external appearances endangered not only women's compliance with sensibility's code of conduct but also their claims to virtue. Modesty, delicacy, and first and foremost, chastity, were not simply a matter of inner, private morality but were particularly defined by strict regulations regarding outer behaviour and appearances[101].

Alexander's *History of Women* included a stark criticism of the customs of the aristocracy which, as we have seen, was also shared by the culture of sensibility. In conduct books and in the

[101] Blair, *Sermons*.

vocabulary of sensibility, aristocratic lifestyle was equated with the corrupted features of the 'world', a fashion-driven sphere of frivolity, luxury and immorality, completely devoid of the virtues of sensibility. As Gregory commented, 'the luxury and dissipation that prevails in genteel life, as it corrupts the hearts in many respects, so it renders it incapable of warm, sincere and steady friendship'[102].

Alexander's criticisms can be mainly found in the fourth chapter of the first volume, 'Of the Employments and Amusements of Women'. After praising the middle classes, 'the most eligible of human conditions', Alexander expressed his fears that by 'copying the examples of the superior ranks, and gadding abroad after every fashionable folly and amusement', the middle social station would loose its natural virtues. The manners of aristocratic ladies were harshly condemned by Alexander in an infuriated paragraph:

> if by employment we understand being occupied in such things as are useful to society, in that case, women of rank and quality, in most of the polite countries of Europe, may be struck entirely out, as having no employment at all; and should we even admit works of fancy and taste into our list of useful employments, such is the love of dissipation, that even few of these are at present executed by ladies of fashion[103].

Alexander went on to focus on particular examples of the idleness and frivolity that filled the life of the 'women of rank' and

---

[102] Gregory, *A Father's Legacy*, p. 63.

[103] Alexander, *History of Women, I*, pp. 132-133.

seemed to be increasingly adopted by the women of the middle classes. It is worth quoting this interesting although lengthy passage:

> in all the polite countries of Europe, women of rank and fashion, as well as those in middling circumstances, with a large portion of idle time upon their hands, with an almost irresistable [sic] inclination to pleasure in whatever form it offers itself, are more often to be met with at the shrine of amusement than of industry: and hence it has been commonly observed, that wherever there is a show, an entertainment, or a crowd, the women are more numerous than the men: But theatrical events of all kinds; balls, assemblies, operas, ridottos, and reviews, seem to be the scenes of their peculiar delight; because, at these, they can indulge their natural propensity for show and ostentation. Riding, walking, sailing, and, in some countries of Europe, even skating and being drawn on the ice in sledges, are female amusements. Beside these, and many others too tedious to mention, the women of fashion, in most parts of Europe, spend a great part of their time in receiving and returning visits; and in some of the politer nations, modern visiting is not spending an hour together; it consists only in her ladyship ordering her coachman to drive to the doors of so many of her acquaintances, and her footman, at each of them, to give in a card with her name, while the lady of the house, though, in the polite phrase, not at home, is looking though the window all the while to see what passes; and in some convenient time after returns the visit and is sure to be received in the same manner[104].

This passage exemplified several issues underlying the criticisms of the aristocratic, worldly manners. Alexander referred to the increasing leisure time available to the women of the middle classes and their growing adoption of the customs of their social superiors. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, the enriched

[104] Alexander, *History of Women, I*, pp. 146-147.

British middle classes could afford many of the amusements which were restricted before to people of higher social position. In addition, due to the processes of commercialisation, enrichment and urbanisation, an increasing number of women belonging to the intermediate social groups found themselves free from many of the traditional female tasks – partly due to the practice, among the better-off, of employing servants. At the same time, the mushrooming of venues of polite intercourse, where female presence was accepted and even required, increased women's presence in the public sphere.

Alexander's impassioned remarks should be interpreted in the light of these processes. On the one hand, Alexander's stance reflected the widespread concerns regarding the corrupting effects of luxury and growing prosperity. On the other, Alexander followed the reaction of the culture of sensibility against the proliferation of polite amusements and gathering places. As we have seen, the culture of sensibility campaigned against this feature of polite sociability, which was associated with frivolity, ostentation and dissimulation, and called for more intimate and domestic forms of sociability. Similarly, Alexander emphasised this association by depicting the ladies' visiting practices as pure affectation, a complete reversal of what was understood by polite sociability and conversation.

This passage expressed again the association present in the culture of sensibility between femininity and a tendency to unrestrained passions and pleasures. In addition, this paragraph could be read as a piece of prescriptive advice in reverse. By recounting the diverse futile and extravagant recreations of the

upper classes, Alexander was implicitly praising the virtues of industry and thriftiness which should characterise sensible and regulated women. Also, the text established a clear connection between the corrupted ways of the aristocratic ladies and their overwhelming presence in the public sphere. By doing so, Alexander pointed out the aristocracy's forfeit of family life, marital friendship and, in short, of the principles of domesticity.

A resolute defence of the ideal of domesticity pervaded many of Alexander's attacks on aristocratic lifestyle. He sternly criticised the aristocratic practice of employing wet nurses instead of breastfeeding their children and deplored that ladies of fortune left their children to be reared by strangers during their first years. Alexander's defence of direct maternal involvement in childcare and nursing echoed the heated debate regarding breastfeeding which took place among medical practitioners in the last decades of the eighteenth century[105].

Alexander's concerns were also shared by Gregory, who advocated breastfeeding in his book *A Comparative View of the State and Faculties of Man with Those of the Animal World*, using the same arguments as Alexander did. Like Gregory, Alexander blamed the excesses of luxury and politeness for the practice of hiring wet nurses and resorted to comparisons with the animal kingdom to

[105] On this subject, see Ludmilla Jordanova, *Nature Displayed. Gender, Science and Medicine, 1760-1820* (London & New York, 1999), Ludmilla Jordanova, *Sexual Visions. Images of Gender in Science and Medicine between the Eighteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Madison, Wisconsin, 1989) and Randolph Trumbach, *The Rise of the Egalitarian Family* (New York, 1978). See also chapter 1 of this PhD thesis.

support his point. Both authors praised breastfeeding as a practice close to nature[106].

However, Alexander, unlike Gregory, denied that mother's milk was especially suited for the child and, thus, could not be replaced without causing some harm to the infant's health. Accordingly, Alexander considered that the domestic ideal provided the strongest arguments in favour of breastfeeding. Breastfeeding should be encouraged due to the psychological benefits it had for mothers and children. Maternal care fostered a loving attachment between mother and child, which was deemed crucial for the well-being of the infant and an essential feature of the mother's role. In addition, the act of breastfeeding, being a natural and necessary part of the maternal duties, would give the mother and her child the 'greatest pleasure'[107].

The domestic ideal underlay Alexander's criticisms of aristocratic arranged marriages. Alexander denounced the persistence of such practice among people of wealth and title in his own day,

> at this day, the daughters of the great, even in the politest countries of Europe, can scarcely be said to enjoy any disposing power of themselves, but are frequently stipulated for in a treaty of peace, or a family compact, and at last married, by proxy, to a man whom they never saw,

---

[106] John Gregory, (1774 ed.) *A Comparative View of the State and Faculties of Man with Those of the Animal World* (London & Tokyo, 1994), chapter 1; Alexander, *History of Women, I*, pp. 135-144

[107] Alexander, *History of Women, I*, pp. 135-144.

> and consequently cannot tell whether they may love or hate[108].

Similarly Gregory warned his daughters against marrying 'from vulgar and mercenary views' and added that 'love is founded in nature, honourable views, virtue, similarity of tastes and sympathy of souls'[109]. Therefore, in much the same way as the culture of sensibility, Gregory and other examples of conduct literature, Alexander firmly encouraged domesticity, an ideal of marital happiness based on friendship, affection and companionship. Alexander would have agreed completely with Gregory's definition of the ideal husband as 'a lover, friend, an equal companion'[110]. Throughout the book, Alexander praised those societies in which a free, loving attachment between the parts led to the marital compact and where the spouses showed a tender affection and respect for each other, and cared for their offspring.

In the *History of Women*, as in Gregory's *Legacy* and in the tradition of conduct literature, the domestic ideal went hand in hand with the defence of different spheres of activity for men and women. Gregory's *Legacy* was a book intended to prepare his daughters to make the right choice in the marriage market and, mainly, to endow his daughters with the qualities respectable men sought. Women, according to Gregory, should be prepared for the basic tasks of household management and mothering, that is, to

---

[108] Alexander, *History of Women, II*, p. 325.

[109] Gregory, *A Father's Legacy*, pp. 117 and 126.

[110] Gregory, *A Father's Legacy*, p. 118.

fulfil their duties as guardians of the private sphere of family and home. Similarly, Alexander argued for different spheres suited to the different qualities which characterised the sexes. According to Alexander,

> each sex has its particular qualities and is fitted by the Author of nature for accomplishing different purposes; (...) in the articles of convenience and necessity, we [men] have greatly the advantage over the women, who, naturally rely on us for whatever is necessary. In the articles of pleasure and refinement, they [women] have as much the advantage of us, and we as naturally look up to them as the source of our pleasures, as they do to us as the source of their sustenance and their fortunes[111].

Different natures determined different spheres of activity. Female duties would include the management of the household, nursing and bringing up children, 'their most natural and common office'[112], while men should work to provide for the family. In addition, the different qualities with which the sexes were endowed determined a basic inequality regarding courtship,

> nature has given to men strength, and to women beauty; our strength endears us to them, not only by affording them protection, but by its labouring efforts for their maintenance; their beauty endears them to us, not only by the delight it offers to our senses, but also by that power it has of softening and composing our more rugged passions; (…) the women dress and use every means to appear beautiful and engaging in order to please the men and the men assume bravery and every masculine accomplishment

[111] Alexander, *History of Women, II*, p. 111.

[112] Alexander, *History of Women, I*, p. 135-136.

> in their power in order to please and render themselves acceptable to women[113].

Accordingly, in order to be esteemed by the other sex, women and men were to be measured by standards which were not only different but also opposed. Beauty, modesty, timidity and delicacy were the qualities which endeared women to men, while courage, gallantry and openness in men would be the traits more valued by women. However, encouraging women to value men for their physical strength and bravery was clearly in contradiction with one of the features of conduct literature which Alexander also endorsed. Besides giving advice on how to be better valued by the opposite sex, conduct literature sought to prevent women from the wicked intentions of sensualists and libertines and to endear them to men of sensibility which were more likely to live up to the loving duties of the domestic household. However, in this passage Alexander seemed to be encouraging women to pursue a type of men more akin to the unreformed rake than to the more polished and less 'physical' man of sensibility.

In courtship these intrinsic qualities determined rules of behaviour which suited the different nature of each sex:

> men have a thousand ways of ingratiating themselves into the favour of the sex, and may practice them all with openness and freedom; whereas women must endeavour to work themselves into our affections by methods silent and disguised; for, should the mask be thrown off, their intentions would not only be frustrated, but the very attempt would fix upon them the character of forwardness,

---

[113] Alexander, *History of Women, II*, pp. 113 and 169.

> and want of that modesty which custom has made so essential a part of female excellence[114].

Similarly, Gregory reminded his daughters of a 'very prudent maxim', that 'love is not to begin on your part, but it is entirely to be the consequence of our attachment to you'[115]. This rules of behaviour set a clear double standard regarding the attitude and the position of the sexes in courtship. Openness, which could be equated with honesty and sincerity, was a prerogative of men. By contrast, women should sacrifice the virtues of freedom and straightforwardness in order adopt a passive role and use a 'mask' of dissimulation and deceit, qualities which were considered vices in men and features of the corrupted world of fashion by the culture of sensibility.

These were not the only contradictions that could be found in Alexander's book, nor in Gregory's. As Mary Catherine Moran has suggested, Gregory's project in *A Father's Legacy* was torn between his claim to be a domestic father and an enlightened author, and the prescriptive nature of the work. The contradictions which arose from this fact could be exemplified by comparing several passages. He affirmed that 'I know nothing that renders a woman more despicable than thinking it essential to happiness to be married' whereas in the following page he remarked that 'I am of the opinion that you may attain a superior degree of happiness in a married state to what you can possibly find in any other'. He defined the book as collection of paternal 'sentiments' but also as a

---

[114] Alexander, *History of Women, II*, p. 112.

[115] Gregory, *A Father's Legacy*, p. 80.

'system of conduct'. He stated 'I have considered your sex not as domestic drudges or the slaves of our pleasure but as our companions and equals' while aiming the book at encouraging 'those virtues and accomplishments which render you most respectable and most amiable in the eyes of my own sex'[116].

Gregory was torn between contradictory beliefs. On the one hand, he valued his daughters as valuable, fully rational beings and desired that they did not marry out of necessity. On the other, he was aware that in his society women were destined for a married life and, thus, of the necessity of making them valuable for the marriage market. Besides, he complied with the double standard arising from the two spheres model which underlay the accepted rules of courtship and the claims to equality of the domestic ideal. Gregory addressed his daughters as rational beings and equals, relinquishing his paternal authority over them as soon as they were capable of judging for themselves and provided them with economic independence to avoid them marrying for reasons different from love and true affection. However, Gregory also extolled the conventionally feminine virtues of modesty, piety and chastity, recommended dissimulation in order to be valued by the other sex and as an essential form of feminine behaviour, and endorsed a view of women as having a naturally submissive, retiring and passive nature.

The same contradictions between enlightenment and prescription plagued Alexander's work and were further

---

116 Moran, *From Rudeness to Refinement*. Gregory, *A Father's Legacy*, pp. 6-8, 104 and 105.

emphasised by the paradoxes arising from the combination of conjectural history and conduct literature which characterised the book.

Although, as we have seen, Alexander argued that different qualities were peculiar to each sex and considered that weakness and delicacy were natural traits of the female sex, in the chapter 'Of the various Opinions Entertained by Different Nations Concerning Women' he expressed a quite opposite view. After reviewing evidence from the animal world and from savage societies, Alexander remarked that men and women had proved to have equal strength and skilfulness and thus, women were 'not at all inferior in abilities of mind to the other sex and even scarcely inferior to them in strength of body'[117]. Further on, he insisted on the similarities between the sexes,

> we lay out as a general rule, that the difference of education and of the mode of living are the principal causes of the corporeal and mental differences which distinguish the sexes from each other; and we persuade ourselves, that nature, in forming the bodies and the minds of both sexes, has been nearly alike liberal to each; and that any apparent difference in the exertions of the strength of the one, or the reasonings of the other, are much more the work of art than of nature[118].

Regarding modesty and delicacy, in the chapter 'Of Delicacy and Chastity' we find two paradoxical arguments being developed. On the one hand, Alexander suggested that delicacy and retirement were natural in women, being 'the most distinguishing peculiarities

---

[117] Alexander, *History of Women, II*, p. 49.

[118] Alexander, *History of Women, II*, pp. 57-58.

which mark the female character' in which 'there is a greater degree of delicacy or coy reserve than in the male'[119]. On the other hand, he devoted most of the chapter to trace a conjectural history of chastity and modesty, reviewing the presence or, more commonly, the lack of these virtues in different societies and ages. Therefore he was forced to reach a troubling compromise between his belief in modesty as a natural trait of femininity and its absence from the female character in the majority of societies examined. Accordingly, he argued that the 'seeds' of delicacy were naturally planted in the female nature but 'in the human genus these seeds require some culture to expand, and bring them to perfection; whereas, on the other hand, too much culture actually destroys them'[120].

Similarly, when tackling the issue of dress and ornaments he remarked, on the one hand, that 'the love of dress is a natural appetite' in the female sex in tune with common assumptions about women. On the other hand, after reviewing historical evidence in the fashion of the conjectural history, he denied that women were the slaves of fashion in a greater degree than men:

> male arrogance is apt to suppose that whim and caprice have dictated every fashion that the other sex have followed; but have they less dictated to us, or have we been slower in obeying them?; (...) we must observe, in justice to the sex, that such preposterous modes of dressing are not peculiar to them alone; the men have not been less rapid in

[119] Alexander, *History of Women, II*, pp. 7 and 41.

[120] Alexander, *History of Women, II*, p. 7.

> their changes, nor have these changes given proofs of a more elegant taste, or a more solid judgement[121].

The paradoxes arising from the overlapping of conjectural historical method with prescriptive concerns could be further examined by exploring Alexander's view regarding women's education. As we have seen, Alexander had stated that female acute sensibility somewhat imperilled women's capacity for strong reasoning. However, he also argued against those who believed in women's intellectual inferiority and underlined that 'we have no plain indication of any superiority conferred upon the males in the powers and faculties of the mind'. He also remarked that the fact that women had yet not been remarkable for any scientific achievement was due to their lack of a proper education and not to their mental incapacities. In the same tone, he condemned the education women received because it seemed 'almost entirely calculated to cultivate the personal graces, while the care of the head, and of the heart, are little, of at all, attended to'[122].

Even so, Alexander showed a paradoxical reluctance to allow women the same education as men:

> while our warmest wishes are, that female education were an object more considered by the legislature, and better planned by parents and guardians, we would not have it understood as our opinion, that women should pore out their fair eyes in becoming adepts in literature. Nature

---

[121] Alexander, *History of Women, II*, pp. 193 and 202.

[122] Alexander, *History of Women, II*, pp. 44-45 and 55 and Alexander, *History of Women, I*, p. 73.

> seems not to have intended them for the more intense and severe studies[123].

Women therefore should not receive the kind of education which was available for men. Instead, female education should concentrate in what was useful for them, particularly 'the offices of domestic life'. Women were not to learn science, literature or philosophy and, if so, they should be only equipped with a few rudiments and general ideas which would allow them to partake in their husbands conversation and 'to become the social partners of a life directed by reason and religion'. Too much learning, Alexander remarked, would be conductive to pedantry, one of the most abhorrent blemishes in the female sex[124].

It was unclear what Alexander considered the ideal curriculum which should guide the instruction of women. He focused on criticising the features of contemporary education that he did not like and referred vaguely to notions of 'usefulness', and to the guidance of reason and religion, without outlining any detailed plan of study or recommending certain subjects over others. 'We pretend not' he affirmed, 'to chalk out the plan in which women should be educated'[125].

In spite of his contradictions and elusiveness, Alexander seemed to endorse the plans for female education outlined in contemporary conduct books, which consisted, with some variations, in reading and writing their own language, needle work,

---

[123] Alexander, *History of Women, I*, p. 87.

[124] Alexander, *History of Women, I*, p. 70.

[125] Alexander, *History of Women, I*, p. 88.

some notions of French and domestic economy. As he remarked, female learning should aim for a difficult balance, 'it should, if possible, be such as to avoid ignorance on the one hand, and pedantry on the other: ignorance makes a female companion contemptible, pedantry makes her ridiculous; nor is it easy to say which of the two are most disgusting'[126].

The most biased side of the language of sensibility should be accounted for Alexander's views regarding female education. As we have seen, women's special sensibility limited their capacity for severe and intense studies and made them particularly suitable for domestic duties. Alexander also used the domestic ideal to justify his mistrust of female intellectual enlightenment. He saw a clear incompatibility between female mental improvement and women's role as mothers and carers, as this passage which dealt with women's intellectual awakening in the late Middle Ages showed.

> they [women] preached in public, supported controversies, published and defended Theses's [sic], filled the chairs of philosophy and law, harangued the popes in Latin, wrote Greek, and read Hebrew: Nuns became poetesses. Women of quality divines. (...) The learned languages were now considered as indispensibly [sic] necessary; and not only men, but women of all ranks and conditions were taught them. In this manner was female genius turned into a wrong channel. It was diverted from the duties of domestic life. It was either soured by study, or rendered petulant by learning; and while it acquired empty words and false philosophy, it lost much of its native sprightliness, and

[126] Alexander, *History of Women, I*, p. 88. For an overview of eighteenth century views on female education, see Jones, *Women in the Eighteenth Century*.

> became daily more an object of admiration, and less an object of love[127].

As this passage exemplifies, serious study damaged female fine sensibility. Consequently, its outcome could only be pedantry and the loss of the qualities which made women suitable for their station of life as mothers and wives. Having barred women from access to the public sphere, learned women, according to Alexander, fell out of place in society, being suitable neither for public life nor for their domestic duties. In addition, this passage underlined another argument which ran through Alexander's criticism of learned women. By spoiling female delicate sensibility, serious study rendered women unattractive, unworthy objects of male desire:

> should they proceed so far as to rival, or even equal us in learning, we should perhaps grudge them the laurels of fame, as much as we do the breeches: and the gaining of these laurels would rob their brows of many of those charms, which to them are more valuable, as they are by us more esteemed[128].

In spite of domesticity's claims to equality between the spouses and his remarks regarding women's rational capacities, Alexander clearly believed that intellectual merits would not make women desirable. On the contrary, learned women were perceived as a threat, a challenge to the 'soft' authority that the domestic ideal bestowed upon the husband. Due to their ultimate destiny as

---

[127] Alexander, *History of Women, I*, pp. 65-66.

[128] Alexander, *History of Women, I*, p. 88.

wives and mothers, women were subject to male desire, and their life should therefore be modelled according to male expectations. Thus, Alexander's words involved not only a prescriptive message but a clear threat against those women willing to believe that they could aspire, as Mary Wollstonecraft did, to an autonomous, independent self.

The contradictory nature of Alexander's project can be further explored by examining his views on marriage. Even if the ideal of domesticity was clearly advocated by Alexander throughout the book, his chapters on marriage did not focus much on a defence of the domestic ideal but were instead infused by the Scottish law tradition and the conjectural aim of his project.

Throughout these chapters Alexander reviewed the different ceremonies and arrangements which, in different times and places, had been used to sanction the union between husband and wife. He clearly followed the conjectural concern with origins and causality and, as Millar and Kames did, argued that use, affection and the protection of the offspring accounted for the institution of marriage. In the fashion of the conjectural historians, he referred to the different factors which influenced the changes in marriage practices and opposed the civilised practice of monogamy to the barbarity of oriental polygamy[129].

---

[129] Lord Kames, (1778 ed.) *Sketches of the History of Man* (London, 1993), 4 vols., John Millar, (1779 ed.) *The Origin of the Distinction of Ranks,* repr. in Lehmann, W. C., *John Millar of Glasgow, 1735-1801. His Life and his Contribution to Sociological Analysis* (Glasgow, 1960).

However, the tradition of natural jurisprudence played a remarkable role in shaping Alexander's conclusions regarding marriage. Natural jurisprudence was one of the main discourses which informed the intellectual development of the Scottish Enlightenment. Rooted in medieval and classical thought, the tradition of natural jurisprudence was revived by Grotius and Pufendorf in the seventeenth century, whose ideas, particularly the latter's, proved deeply influential among eighteenth century Scottish authors. Both authors developed the notion of natural law, which was different from divine law and from the positive legislation of the state. Knowable through reason and essential to the development of human society, natural law was the basis of a series of natural rights and duties which were binding even in the state of nature. These natural rights demanded essentially the protection of one's person and property from any injury or loss. However, the preservation of society required a further obligation, that of keeping promises and contracts, from which 'adventitious' duties, artificial and voluntarily subscribed, emerged. These obligations operated at different levels, from the formation of governments and transactions of property to the personal relations between husband and wife and master and servant[130].

According to the tradition of natural jurisprudence marriage was a human contract, the first among the 'adventitious' states, being rooted in the most basic human needs and crucial to the continuity of the human race. This contract involved several

[130] On natural jurisprudence, see Rendall, 'Virtue and Commerce' and Istvan Hont and Michael Ignatieff (eds.), *Wealth and Virtue. The Shaping of Political Economy in the Scottish Enlightenment* (Cambridge, 1983).

fundamental conditions which were listed by Pufendorf as follows: mutual fidelity, cohabitation and male authority over the household. Although fidelity was required from both sexes, female chastity was particularly stressed because it was essential to secure the legitimacy of the offspring.

The thought of Pufendorf and Grotius was popularised in Scotland by Francis Hutcheson (1694-1746), one of the earliest figures of the Scottish Enlightenment, whose ideas in moral philosophy exerted a remarkable influence over the generation of literati associated with the highest point of the Enlightenment in Scotland. Committed to the belief in the sociable and benevolent qualities of the human being, Hutcheson reworked Pufendorf's ideas regarding marriage and portrayed the marital relation in a more positive light, whose emphasis on affection and friendship bespoke the seeds of domesticity. Hutcheson opposed any suggestion that the obligation to fidelity was not a reciprocal one and argued against the absolute authority of the husband within marriage. He did not allow the husband the right to command obedience from the wife and criticised the unlimited power granted to the man by certain nations: 'the powers vested in husbands by the civil laws of many nations are monstrous, such as that of life and death'[131]. Although he was a resolute proponent of the division of spheres according to each sex, he also emphasised the equality of husband and wife and proposed a system of

[131] Moran, *From Rudeness to Refinement*, p. 15.

external arbitration which would decide when quarrels in fundamental matters arose[132].

Following the tradition of natural jurisprudence, Alexander pointed out the contractual nature of marriage: 'marriage is only a natural regulation, not a divine institution'. Accordingly, Alexander emphasised the public nature of marriage, 'marriage, therefore, stands in the same light as other transactions of a nature interesting to the public'. Similarly, Alexander remarked that its lack of a religious nature did not divest the marital institution from its binding powers and moral content. Being one of the most important 'adventitious' obligations, the marital compact belonged to the realm of morality and thus should be respectfully honoured. As Alexander argued, 'its force and obligatory power is derived from (...) our regard to moral rectitude, and its obligation upon us would be as strong, and a breach of it as immoral and dishonourable, if we made it in our closet, as if before witnesses'[133].

Like Hutcheson, Alexander refused to demand from women a greater degree of chastity than from men. Even if he suggested that modesty and delicacy were traits somewhat natural in women and praised chastity as 'the greatest ornament of their character'[134], he did not demand from women a greater degree of fidelity than from men. Accordingly to Alexander, chastity should be equally observed by both parts. In addition, Alexander shared Hutcheson's critical view regarding husband's authority in marriage. 'We shall

---

132 On Francis Hutcheson, see Moran, *From Rudeness to Refinement*, pp. 1-19 and Rendall, 'Virtue and Commerce', pp. 51-56.

133 Alexander, *History of Women, II*, pp. 313, 321 and 320.

134 Alexander, *History of Women, II*, p. 43.

therefore', he wrote, 'go on to observe, that besides the illegal advantages, which power is ever apt to assume, over weakness; as men were almost everywhere the lawgivers, most of the legal advantages of matrimony were also in their side'[135].

However, not every Scottish author shared Alexander's and Hutcheson's views regarding marriage and female chastity. In spite of being deeply influenced by Hutcheson's thought, Adam Smith showed a harsh stance regarding female chastity. In the light of the tradition of natural jurisprudence, he compared breaches of chastity in women to the breaking of contracts by men. Chastity, according to Smith, was a specifically feminine moral obligation, measured according to especial standards by the impartial spectator, the inner and sympathetic judge which presided over Smith's moral theory. Regarding female chastity, this impartial spectator clearly assumed a masculine bias. Breaches of chastity by women could not arise sympathy in the observer; accordingly, they were faults that could not be redeemed and were to be judged by unyielding standards,

> breach of chastity dishonours irretrievably. No circumstances, no solicitation, can excuse it; no sorrow, no repentance can atone for it. We are so nice in this respect that even a rape dishonours, and the innocence of the mind cannot, in our imagination, wash out the pollution of the body[136].

---

[135] Alexander, *History of Women, II*, p. 342.

[136] Quoted in Rendall, 'Virtue and Commerce', p. 60. See also, Brown, '"Mere Inventions of the Imagination"', Henry C. Clark, 'Women and Humanity in Scottish Social Thought: The Case of Adam Smith', *Historical Reflections*, 19, (1993), pp. 335-361, Dwyer, *The Age of the Passions*, Nancy Folbre, '"The

In order to further explore Alexander view's it is worth quoting a paragraph which deals with many of the issues regarding marriage more discussed in his day.

> matrimony, in all nations, being a compact between a male and a female, for the purpose of continuing the species, the first and foremost obligation of it has been thought fidelity; but, by various people, this fidelity has been variously understood. Almost all nations, ancient and modern, have agreed in requiring the most absolute unconditional fidelity on the part of the women; while, on that of the man, greater latitude has been given. Civilians, who have endeavoured to assign a reason for this difference, tell us, what the hand of severity is held so closely over the incontinence of married women, and so much latitude given to men, because the men generally have the care of providing for the offspring; and it would be hard that a man should be obliged to provide for, and leave his estate to children which he could never with certainty call his own, were the same indulgence given to the women as to the men. A shorter way of explaining the matter would have been, to have said, that men are generally the legislators. Where women have shared in the legislation, they have put their own sex on a more equal footing with ours[137].

A discussion of Hume's ideas regarding marriage underlay Alexander's views. Following the tradition of natural jurisprudence, Hume demanded from women the utmost regard for chastity. The different nature of the sexes and their different roles in reproduction made necessary a double standard according to which chastity was a stronger obligation for women than for

---

Improper Arts". Sex in Classical Political Economy', *Population and Development Review*, 18, (1992), pp. 105-122, Kuiper, 'The Construction of a Masculine Identity' and Chris Nyland, 'Adam Smith, Stage Theory and the Status of Women', *History of Political Economy*, 25, (1993), pp. 617-640.

[137] Alexander, *History of Women, II*, pp. 341-342.

men. Because women bore children and men do not, men required women's chastity as guarantee of their parenthood. In addition, while women were naturally inclined to care and provide for the children, men, lacking women's generosity and the certainty about their parenthood, would neglect their duties as parents were not for the assurance of the legitimacy of the offspring which wifely chastity entailed. Therefore, in return for men's acceptance of their paternal responsibilities, women's sexuality was to be restricted by a double standard which imposed asymmetrical marital duties by stressing female chastity over men's. Even so, Hume refused to support the authority of the husband over the wife. According to Hume, female chastity was a social artifice, unnaturally curbing women's sexual nature, which was not different from men's. Female chastity was necessary for the survival of society and the perpetuation of the species; accordingly, society as a whole demanded women's chastity, not individual husbands with authority over their wives[138].

Alexander seemed to agree with Hume's stance regarding the social nature of chastity. In the chapter on delicacy and chastity, he stressed the social nature of this virtue. Public good, he argued, depended on female chastity: 'the order, peace, and good government of society are influenced by female chastity; and (...) each of them are destroyed by incontinence'. Female chastity was better protected by means of a social nature. Religious faith and regard for family honour fostered female chastity. Mothers should

---

[138] See Annette C. Baier, 'Hume on Women's Complexion', in Peter Jones (ed.), *The Science of Man in the Scottish Enlightenment. Hume, Reid and their Contemporaries* (Edinburgh, 1989).

encourage chastity by instilling into their daughters the virtues of modesty and timidity, and a strong sense of shame from an early age. Society further secured female chastity by shunning those who breached this principle from polite society and by limiting their chances of marriage[139].

However, Alexander disagreed with Hume when he came to assign the causes of the enforcement of chastity on women. According to Alexander, the demand of the utmost chastity from women was not rooted in the necessity of ensuring the legitimacy of the offspring. Instead, it was the privileged access that men had to civil and legal power which endowed social regulations and institutions with a masculine bias which enshrined the double standard. Even so, in his chapters on marriage, Alexander seemed more interested in condemning the deprivation of property that marriage entailed for women than the sexual double standard that it imposed on women.

Alexander's bold remarks concerning this issue were in open contradiction with the prescriptive message which infused most of the book by which women were urged to develop a quasi-natural sense of modesty and delicacy. In addition, although Alexander, like Hume, did not deny that women possessed sexual inclinations and urges, he was reluctant that it should be so. Thus, even if he included plentiful instances of female promiscuousness and free sexuality as raw material for his conjectural history of women, he also suggested that modesty and delicacy were natural in women and encouraged women to artificially develop these traits.

---

139 Alexander, *History of Women, II*, pp. 38-41.

Similarly, even if Alexander denounced how the negative consequences of masculine power were institutionalised through marriage, he apparently did not wish for a radical change. In barbarous and savage societies, masculine power would surely result in female oppression. However, in civilised societies, the effects of politeness and refinement would naturally soften masculine power and would grant women a happy, yet subordinate status:

> where civil society has made little or no progress, the distinguishing characteristic of power is to tyrannize over weakness. Hence the men, till they are softened by politeness, and taught by custom to do otherwise, commonly enslave and oppress the women. (...) In Europe, the power of a husband is considerably extended by the laws of the gospel, and of the constitution, both over the person and the property of his wife; but this power is generally executed with so much lenity and indulgence, that a stranger, on seeing a spouse and his loving rib together, would be apt to imagine it was placed on her side[140].

As we have seen, Alexander's *History of Women* subscribed to the discourse of sensibility in its more prescriptive aspects for women. He advocated the role of women as wives and mothers and supported the calls of the language of sensibility for a female private sphere framed by the vocabulary of domesticity. Similarly, Alexander declared his concerns regarding female pedantry and severely limited women's rational and educational possibilities. However, Alexander also reflected the most positive aspects of the discourse of sensibility, as reflected in the conjectural nature of the

[140] Alexander, *History of Women, II*, p. 343-344.

book. Like Kames, Millar and Hume Alexander believed that women's finer sensibility was a key factor in bringing about a refined and civil society by softening men's rough nature through the mixed company of the sexes. Accordingly, he wrote

> as the bodies of women are of a softer and more delicate nature then those of the men, so their minds are generally more finely attuned to the gentler feelings of tenderness and humanity…

> woman (...) was not intended solely to propagate and nourish the species but to form us for society, to give an elegance to our affections, a relish to our pleasures, to sooth or afflictions and to soften our cares. Of all the various causes which influence our conduct, our feelings and our sentiments, none operate so powerfully as the society of women[141].

Women's company would polish men's appearance and external behaviour and, most importantly, their sensations, feelings and passions. Female influence would stir the virtues of compassion, sympathy and humanity in men thus lessening male asocial and violent tendencies. As a result, the basis of civility would be upheld, for these virtues would not only infuse individual private intercourse but also penetrate the social sphere of politics and government. Accordingly Alexander argued that 'liberty and independence, the most inestimable blessings of mankind, are no where at so low an ebb, as in the countries where the women have

[141] Alexander, *History of Women, I*, pp. 368 and 475.

no political influence and, where the men keep almost no company with them'[142].

Alexander's remarks regarding women's influence on society stood in overt contradiction with his arguments as developed in the most prescriptive parts of the book. The conjectural sections of the text advocated a culturally constructed female public role whereas the chapters inspired by conduct literature emphasised the immanent private nature of women. How to reconcile the paradoxes which underlie Alexander's peculiar mixture of conjectural history and prescription?

One could say that the rambling and contradictory nature of the book was the logical result of Alexander's attempt to bring together two very different and even opposed genres. However, I would argue that in spite of its dissimilarities, conjectural history and conduct literature shared many features and, therefore, Alexander's endeavour was not preposterous. Even if some of the paradoxes which plagued Alexander's work were the result of Alexander's failure to blend smoothly both genres, other contradictions were deeply embedded in both discourses, the prescriptive and the conjectural historical, and were somewhat intrinsic to them.

Conduct literature has been considered as an important element within the politics of sexuality and desire since, as Nancy Armstrong has put it, 'conduct books for women strive to reproduce, if not always revise, the culturally approved forms of

---

[142] Alexander, *History of Women, I*, p. 499.

desire'[143]. According to this author, the main feature of conduct books was that they dealt mainly with sexual desire; they told women how to become desirable, how to attract a socially approved male and keep him happy while, at the same time, determining what kind of women men should found desirable. Consequently, the literature of conduct for women transcended the gender barriers of their intended readers and, although they were aimed at moulding female desire, they also addressed masculine desire. Following Joan Wallach Scott and Michel Foucault, Nancy Armstrong has argued for the political nature of these writings because the forms of desire they represented were inextricably linked to the organisation of the family and courtship, which constituted a form of political power in their own right[144].

Similarly the Scottish conjectural histories which allotted a significant space to the progress of the female sex, such as Kames's, Millar's and obviously Alexander's, were narratives primarily concerned with the expression of desire and sexuality through socially accepted forms. Conjectural histories tracked the evolution of human sexuality throughout time and space alongside their exploration of the refinement or progress of the passions of man. Conjectural historians recognised that sexuality was one of the strongest urges in the human being and, in turn, pointed out the disruptive potential of sexuality, by associating an unregulated

---

143 Armstrong and Tennenhouse, 'The Literature of Conduct', p. 1.

144 See Armstrong and Tennenhouse, 'The Literature of Conduct', Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, Joan W. Scott, 'Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis', in Joan W. Scott (ed.), *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York, 1999) and Michel Foucault, *Historia de la sexualidad* (Madrid, 1987-1989), 3 vols.

sexuality with savagery and primitive societies. Free extramarital sexual activities were concomitant with anarchy, disorder and violence in other spheres of human activity, for all of them were the result of an unbridled and unrestrained yielding to the passions and instincts.

In addition, loose sexual intercourse was considered particularly dangerous for the well-being of the community. Lacking the legal sanction of matrimony, free sexuality prevented the emergence of the monogamous family and the consolidation of private property, by hampering the transmission of property alongside male lines. Both family and private property were considered by the conjectural historians as the touchstones of human social development and progress. Since an unrestricted sexuality was linked to male disregard for parental duties and associated with male brutality and tyranny over inferiors, it was also thought to endanger the perpetuation of the species and bring about political despotism.

Therefore, conjectural histories could be considered as histories of sexuality since they traced the evolution of (mostly) male desire from unbridled instinct to domestic driven, tender affection. Since sexual desire was regarded as a passion or instinct inherent to the human being, the exploration of its evolution was undertaken hand in hand with the enquiry on the refinement of human nature and feelings which was also the subject of conjectural history. In this respect, conjectural histories could be certainly be considered as histories of the advance of sensibility and its related virtues, inscribed in a wider history of the development of the modern self, which found its ultimate

expression in the polished societies of western Europe. Alexander's book, like Millar's and Kames's conjectural histories, tracked the refinement of human passions, a process by which men came to regard women as their 'friends and companions' instead of the 'drudges and slaves of sensual pleasure'.

However, while in conjectural history the evolution of men's self was depicted as culturally constructed thus undergoing changes of further refinement through the ages, women's self was considered somewhat natural and ascribed a passive role in this process. Already naturally refined, delicate and possessing a fine sensibility, women's qualities remained to some extent unchanged through human evolution. In spite of their role as agents of male refinement, the history the female self was the history of the unfolding of female natural qualities, which were progressively allowed further display thanks to men's growing appreciation of the intrinsic female virtues. The rise of women's status from drudgery in primitive societies to their privileged position in polite societies was considered the result of the increased value which the virtues of sensibility, which the female sex embodied, were given by men rather than the outcome of an active female pursuit of improvement and respect.

In this light, Alexander argued that common beliefs on female inferiority were due to the fact that men had always valued those virtues and activities which were natural to the masculine sphere, showing disregard for female intrinsic qualities and appropriate duties. In order to redress the balance between the sexes and establish their relation upon a fairer ground, he concluded, it was

necessary that men considered female abilities and tasks as important as their own:

> men set the greatest value upon the martial abilities which distinguish them in the field, or upon the literary ones which make them conspicuous as statesmen and orators, while they hardly ever consider the excellence of female sprightliness and vivacity, qualities which diffuse gaiety and cheerfulness around them; nor these pains which the sex patiently suffer, and powers they exert, in raising up a generation to succeed us when we shall be no more. Are these less useful than the desolating arts of war, or even than the speculations of the statesmen and improvements of the philosopher, or are the women less distinguished in them than the men are in the other?[145].

Eventually, conjectural histories intersected with prescriptive literature. Once women's charms had achieved men's attention and regard, conjectural historians and Alexander considered that this new improved relation between the sexes should be upheld for it was fraught with perils. Luxury and the dangers which accompanied commercialisation could revert this situation by allowing an even freer intercourse between the sexes which would disrupt this precarious balance and bring about corruption and the ills of the spread of sensualism. In addition, sexual desire was still considered a dangerous passion, in spite of the checks of politeness and domesticity, and thus, should be regulated. It was agreed that, due to their more delicate and gentle nature, women's sexuality would be more easily controlled than men's and, in addition, since women benefited mostly of this new situation, it

[145] Alexander, *History of Women, II*, p. 48.

was in their own interest to conform to the standard of femininity which had granted them so many advantages.

Thus, it could be said that conduct literature complemented conjectural history. Conduct books sought to perpetuate a standard of femininity which conjectural history had demonstrated to be productive of many social blessings, contributing to the improvement of man's rougher nature and female lot alike. Accordingly, in Alexander's view, his conjectural project would not be complete unless furnished with the necessary prescriptive contents which ensured that women secured the increasing value they had achieved in the eyes of men and which was essential for the survival of civil society, polite sociability and domestic love.

The interaction between the prescriptive and the conjectural narratives could be exemplified by Alexander's remarks regarding the prominent role which the *salonières* played in contemporary France. In the chapter 'Of Female Education' Alexander valued positively the institution of the female salon.

> France has produced several women distinguished for their judgement and their learning; and even in the present dissipated age, while female coteries commonly meet for diversion, or for gaming, there are in Paris societies of women, which meet at stated times to determine the merit of every new work; and happy is the author who meets their approbation; their weight in the scale of literature, as well as of politics, being for the most part sufficient to over-ballance [sic] any thing that can be opposed to it[146].

French *salonières* certainly conformed to Alexander's opinions regarding female learning and influence on society, in spite of his

[146] Alexander, *History of Women, I*, pp. 70-71.

apprehensions regarding pedantry and female education. Sufficiently learned in serious subjects to judge the value of a work of literature, yet French women did not attempt to become authors and interfere in the closed and male academic sphere of culture, thus threatening men's authority in learning. Instead, the *salonières* favoured sociability, politeness and learning, helping with their refined taste to reform male capacities and talents while, at the same time, leaving the forefront of the literary world to men and maintaining a retired and subordinate position. We should note, besides, that Alexander depicted the *salon* as a gathering composed exclusively of female participants. Thus, the female interference in the public sphere of letters was kept limited within the private nature of female enterprises and duties.

SENSIBILITY AND THE REFORMATION OF MALE MANNERS

The culture of sensibility not only affected current definitions of femininity but also involved a rethinking and even subversion of traditional standards of masculinity. Novelists, philosophers and learned authors embarked on an attempt to change customary male manners, encouraging men to live up to the new standards of sensitive masculinity. By condemning drunkenness, gambling, violence and the roughest forms of traditional male sociability, eighteenth century authors fostered a reformed ideal of man, characterised by the virtues of compassion, humanity and

sympathy and able to interact politely in heterosocial spheres of sociability[147].

This change in male manners has been linked to the historical process described by Norbert Elias in his canonical book, *The Civilising Process*. Elias argued that, from the sixteenth century to the nineteenth century, Western Europe witnessed a steadily imposition of standards of shame, delicacy and self-control which resulted in an increasing disciplining of appetites, desires and passions. By this process, adults were encouraged not only to control the physical operations of the body but also to show an increasing degree of restraint and respect in their daily interaction with their fellow men. Displays of violence and cruelty were severely condemned by the new standards of acceptable demeanour. Adequate and polished 'manners' acquired a decisive importance, becoming marks of status and class[148].

According to Elias, the new patterns of behaviour emerged in the courts. As a result of the decline of feudalism and the rise of the absolutist states, the aristocracy became deprived of its traditional marks of status and sources of political power, such as the power to raise armies, and turned to elaborate codes of refined behaviour in order to secure its privileged position within the increasingly complex and subtle courtly politics. Civilised manners radiated outwards from the court, penetrated the upper classes and

---

147 See Barker-Benfield, *Culture of Sensibility*, pp. 37-103 and pp. 215-286, Carter, *Men and the Emergence of Polite Society* and Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People*, pp. 461-518.

148 See Norbert Elias, *El proceso de la civilización. Investigaciones sociogenéticas y psicogenéticas* (Madrid, 1993).

were imitated by the next class down and so on, spreading refinement downwards in the social ladder as a means of claiming distinction[149].

According to Barker-Benfield 'it can be inferred that eighteenth century Britain was a crucial geographical and chronological location for the process Elias describes'[150]. Eighteenth century British culture was remarkable for its insistence on manners and polite demeanour. Philosophers, among whom the Scottish authors played a key role, devoted themselves to chart the progressive polishment of manners and supported the new patterns of behaviour by emphasising the advantages of politeness and refinement, and encouraging the virtues of humanity and sympathy. The processes of urbanisation, commercialisation and social change which characterised eighteenth century Britain can be interpreted in the light of Elias's theories. As a result of growth of commercialisation, the public sphere of economic transactions became increasingly complex and open to individuals of different incomes and status, thus, highlighting the necessity of a proper behaviour in the interactions between human beings. Courtesy and self-possession became increasingly necessary in business and credit activities. The bourgeoning middle classes adopted these codes of sociability and outer demeanour as a mark of their rising status and in order to shorten the gap with their aristocratic

149 See Elias, *El Proceso de la civilización.*

150 Barker-Benfield, *Culture of Sensibility*, p. 79.

superiors and detach themselves from their working class inferiors[151].

British upper and middle classes embraced eagerly the new polished standards of behaviour. Not only did they assume them as their own but they also sought them to permeate the whole society, thus embarking on a campaign for the reformation of manners, which had its roots in the seventeenth century. These reforming attempts were part of a European pattern, by which Reformation and counter-Reformation elites attempted to reform the culture of ordinary people. Swearing, drinking and unrestrained violence were harshly condemned by the reformers, who focused their attacks on particular sites of low class culture, such as carnival festivities and the taverns. The culture of sensibility continued these reforming efforts, extending their aim upwards in the social scale. Within the discourse of sensibility, authors censored not only the depraved customs of low class culture but also aristocratic activities such as duelling. The figure of the rake came to embody everything which the vocabulary of sensibility denounced. Experienced sensualists, rakes were condemned for their fashionable yet frivolous habits, their tendency to immoderate swearing, drinking and fighting and their mistreatment of the female sex[152].

The moralising attempts of the culture of sensibility were often in tune with religious campaigns for the reformation of morality. The culture of sensibility was frequently the target of the

---

151 Barker-Benfield, *Culture of Sensibility*, pp. 77-98.

152 Barker-Benfield, *Culture of Sensibility*, pp. 37-104.

attacks of religious authorities, who disliked the softer, polished style of preaching adopted by religious advocates of the discourse of sensibility, such as the Scottish Moderates, and confronted the secularist stance of some of its representatives, such as Hume. However, the reforming agenda of the discourse of sensibility offered areas of convergence with the current religious establishment as exemplified by sensibility's defence of the virtues of humanity and compassion, and its emphasis on the union of refined manners and inner virtue. In addition, the emergence of Methodism in the eighteenth century resembled several features of the culture of sensibility. Like the discourse of sensibility, Methodism rejected the worldly pursuit of fashion and other consumer goods and entertainments, and stressed feeling and emotion as main components of religious faith. John Wesley, the leader of the Methodist movement, encouraged this connection by his publication of sentimental novels and poems[153].

The man of feeling advocated by the discourse of sensibility involved a redefinition of traditional standards of masculinity. During the eighteenth century, ideals of manliness were still infused by the civic humanist discourse and by the Roman stoical paradigm. Thus, manhood was defined by forbearance and self-command, and by the capacity for military courage and patriotism. Gender difference was conceived in terms of a stark divide between rational and detached males, and sensitive, caring and

---

153 See Barker-Benfield, *Culture of Sensibility*, pp. 257-275, Carter, *Men and the Emergence of Polite Society*, pp. 40-45, Sher, *Church and University*. On Methodism, see Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People*, pp. 235-289 and Prest, *Albion Ascendant*, pp. 141-3, 207-9.

compassionate women. However, the discourse of sensibility urged men to acquire the very qualities which had been formerly associated with femininity, such as humanity and tender feelings, and lessen their identification with the core of traditional masculinity. Coarseness, brutality and aloofness were no longer considered the marks of an exemplary masculine behaviour[154].

In addition, the culture of sensibility disavowed former masculine archetypes. The aristocratic manly ideal had been condemned by the vocabulary of sensibility through its denunciation of frivolous rakes, immoral libertines and insensitive codes of honour which enshrined violence in the form of duels. The discourse of sensibility disapproved of warrior-like, impassive models of masculinity and called for the virtues of compassion and tenderness. The importance of cool rationality, another main characteristic of masculinity, was distrusted not only by the emphasis on feelings but also by a sustained criticism of the figure of the scholar. Eighteenth century writers commented on the many ills attending a life entirely devoted to letters. Solitary, surrounded by books and detached from human company, the figure of the erudite was commonly depicted as pedantic, devoid of the tender affections of humanity and sympathy which could only be learned through polite sociability[155].

To the former masculine role models of the warrior, the scholar and the rake, sensibility opposed the exemplary figures of the loving husband, domestic father and polite gentleman. Learned

---

[154] Carter, *Men and the Emergence of Polite Society*, pp. 53-87.

[155] See Carter, *Men and the Emergence of Polite Society*, pp 53-87. For an example of these criticisms see, Gregory, *A Comparative View*, pp. 129-151.

without pedantry, self-controlled yet compassionate, the man of feeling felt more at ease in the private sphere of the family and intimate sociability than in the public sphere of the 'world' and fashionable amusements. The new man was capable of forging sympathetic bonds with fellow human beings and of expressing his feelings not only verbally but also physically through a moderate crying, sighing and trembling. Unlike traditional stereotypes of masculinity, which were forged in homosocial environments and thrived in the company of men, the sensitive man enjoyed and benefited from female company, which curbed male natural excesses, decisively contributing to a refined frame of mind and polished manners. While former standards of masculinity were defined by superiority over women and accepted, even encouraging, the abuse of women, the culture of sensibility urged men to consider women as their friends and companions and to treat them with respect and deference.

However, as we have seen, to reconcile the values of sensibility with manliness was often difficult as excesses of feeling and refinement were often considered as signs of effeminacy. Thus, theorists of sensibility focused on the compatibility between sensibility and masculinity by preserving many of the traits associated with former standards of masculinity. As a result, traditional male virtues, mainly of a stoical origin, persisted in emerging styles of manliness. Polite conversation, it was remarked, demanded rationality and self-control in order to achieve a poised expression and avoid interrupting others. Sympathy, as we have seen, had been related with a capacity for self-regulating own interests and passions which would result in a capacity to

overcome narrow self-interest and focus instead on fellow feeling. Although physical demonstrations of feelings were encouraged, advocates of sensibility cautioned against excessive weeping and sighing, which were not only marks of an effeminate character but also symptoms of a feeble, melancholic constitution. As we have seen, physical and mental strength continued to be qualities linked to masculinity rather than to femininity.

Alexander joined sensibility's attempts to reform male behaviour and erect softer standards of masculinity. Considering the status of women the main mark of the degree of civilisation a society had achieved, he condemned the nations which had assigned women a subordinate position and/or had treated women as insensitive, irrational creatures, however great their progress in the arts, sciences or institutional development. Thus, he bitterly complained about women's seclusion in Ancient Greece and the custom of polygamy in Eastern nations. Accordingly, he wrote,

> it is observed by an able panegyrist for the fair, that the greatest respect has always been paid them [the Greeks] by the wisest and best of nations. If this be a fact, it naturally follows, that the Greeks forfeited one great claim to that wisdom which has always has been attributed to them; for we have good reason to believe that they regarded their women only as instruments of raising up members to the state; considering them in the same cool, dispassionate, and we may add, unsocial light[156].

He valued the refinement of the passions and the spread of the virtues of humanity and compassion over the sole practice of the stoic virtues of forbearance and self-command, and civic

[156] Alexander, *History of Women, I*, p. 190.

humanist military and patriotic prowess, such as in Classical Rome and Greece. As Alexander argued, the Greeks were

> a people whose fame has been to much trumpeted, that we are apt to annex the idea of every virtue to their name, to consider them as highly polished and civilized, and consequently to expect that, amongst them, the fair sex were treated with that indulgence, and raised to that dignity, which they commonly enjoy in nations farthest advanced in the arts of culture and refinement: But in this expectation we shall be much mistaken, for though the Greeks were a people severely virtuous in whatever regarded their country, they were far from being tender and humane, and hardly knew any of those soft blandishments which smooth the asperity of rugged male nature; and which, while they render us more agreeable to the women, are only to be acquired in their company[157].

Like the advocates of the culture of sensibility, Alexander expressed his critical views regarding the figure of the scholar. 'For though books may furnish proper ideas, and experience improve the understanding', he declared, 'it is only the company and acquaintance of the ladies, which can bestow the easiness of address by which the fine gentlemen is distinguished from the mere scholar, and man of business'[158]. In the same vein, Alexander deplored those men who guided their conduct regarding women only from depraved and sensualist principles and urged men to treat women with tenderness and affection.

We should therefore consider Alexander's book not only as a book aiming at guiding and shaping female conduct but also as a work intended to reform men's behaviour and thus, bring about a

---

[157] Alexander, *History of Women, I*, p. 189.

[158] Alexander, *History of Women, I*, p. 490.

felicitous turn to the already polished manners of his contemporary society. Alexander complained that in spite that 'when (...) we proceed to consider the share that each sex has had in the progress of these improvements which lead to civilization, it appears, that, each, in its proper sphere, has contributed nearly in an equal proportion to this great and valuable purpose', women were 'every where in some degree slaves' and in most nations were considered to be inferior to men[159].

He blamed men for these ill-founded beliefs which had resulted in the deprivation women from their due worth, respect and education. Women were generally considered inferior to men because men, narrow-mindedly, had hardly ever valued female natural qualities and duties. Men, according to Alexander, were responsible for women's faulty or lack of education, had divested women from their rights to property and had enshrined a double standard which set a higher value over female chastity than over men's. Moreover, men were responsible for corrupting women's virtue: 'men, who are greatly interested that women should be sensible and virtuous, seem by their conduct towards that sex, to have entered into a general conspiracy to render them otherwise'[160].

Alexander condemned not only men's belief in women's inferiority but also the extravagant adoration which had been professed to women in different times. Both extremes were contrary to the natural and equal relation of the sexes, which

---

159 Alexander, *History of Women, II*, pp. 53 and 55.

160 Alexander, *History of Women, I*, p. 86.

should be based on mutual regard and friendship. Thus, he remarked, 'there is in the fate of women something exceedingly singular; they have at all periods, and almost in all countries, been, by our sex, constantly oppressed and adored'[161].

Imbued with the principles of sensibility, Alexander wished to instil the virtues of humanity and fellow-feeling in his countrymen not only in relation to their treatment of women but also regarding broader issues. Thus, we find in Alexander's book an early denunciation of racism and a stark condemnation of colonialism. In a set of paragraphs endowed with a remarkable cultural relativism, Alexander pleaded for the principles of sensibility to infuse attitudes concerning the racial 'other' and the management of the colonies. To the rapaciousness and numberless evils of war and conquest, Alexander opposed the countless benefits of peace and sympathy.

After reviewing the common and extremely negative opinions entertained by his contemporaries regarding the African blacks and commenting on contradictory accounts which portrayed some African nations in a positive light, in an enraged paragraph, Alexander denounced European prejudice and slave trade:

> perhaps even that former [depiction] is not so bad as it is represented, being sketched out almost entirely, either by declaiming priests of their own nation [African], or by Europeans, who are strongly prejudiced against the Africans, on account of the losses they have sustained by their plunderings and depredations. These things, no doubt, justly excite our indignation, and extort from us every ungracious epithet; but were we to have the character of the Europeans drawn by an African, would he have more

[161] Alexander, *History of Women, I*, p. 150.

> reason to be indulgent to us? No; he might treat us with still greater severity; what horrid scene would he probably paint? He would delineate a people, who profess a religion, the precepts of which breathe nothing but gentleness and humanity, in spite of nature, and in spite of that religion, carrying away by fraud and force, every year, thousands of his helpless countrymen into slavery; he could tell how the merciless masters of these, exact from them a labour superior to their strength, and even suffer that strength to fail for want of sustenance; - - - he would tell of the whips, the tortures, and the deaths inflicted upon them, should they even happen to consider themselves as human beings, or venture to assert the rights of nature and of humanity! -- - he would tell --- but we desist from the dismal tale, as we feel ourselves almost transformed into Africans whilst we relate it[162].

Further on, he argued against one of the more common arguments used in order to advance the expansion of the British empire, *i.e.* that the natives would benefit from British rule which would diffuse civilisation, progress and political freedom.

> from the intercourse that has long subsisted between Europe and many of the countries we have been considering, some reformation in manners might reasonably have been expected. But the Europeans who have gone abroad, instead of demonstrating to the natives that they were superior to them in virtue as well as in knowledge, seem in general, the moment they left their own country, to have thrown aside every principle, and every idea, but that of amassing wealth, though at the expence [sic] of probity, and of conscience; and instead of introducing more order and regularity, have but too often given a loose to every voluptuous appetite, and outdone in every species of debauchery, those who were neither restrained by their laws, nor their religion. Nor has this flagitious conduct been peculiar to one European nation only, all those who have planted colonies, and extended

[162] Alexander, *History of Women, I*, pp. 417-418.

> their commerce, have been almost equally infamous for cruelty, oppression, and debauchery[163].

Regarding the nascent British empire in India and the riches amassed there, Alexander wrote,

> the immense plunder lately brought to England from the plains of Hindostan [sic] are but too evident proofs of what our countrymen have there committed. Such loads of treasure are not the gradual produce of the arts of peace, nor even of fields disfigured by the horrors of war; unless that war, like a deluge, indiscriminately levels friend and enemy as it goes along. Avarice, sordid avarice seems alone to have occupied the breasts of the greatest part of those who have travelled from Europe to India; and from so fruitful a source has sprung up almost every other crime[164].

Alexander's concerns about his masculine readership should lead us to wonder for whom was the text intended. In the first edition of the book, Alexander included an introductory advertisement in which he openly stated the kind of reader he was hoping for. 'The following book', he declared, 'was composed solely for the amusement and instruction of the fair Sex'. Further on he remarked,

> we have not vanity enough to recommend our work to the learned; they must have met with every anecdote related in it; but as the generality of the fair sex, whose reading is more confined, now spend many of their idle hours in poring over novels and romances, which greatly tend to mislead the understanding and corrupt the heart, we cannot help expressing a wish, that they would spare a part of their time to look into the history of their own Sex, a history,

---

[163] Alexander, *History of Women, I*, pp. 433-434.

[164] Alexander, *History of Women, I*, pp. 437-438.

> which we flatter ourselves will afford them no irrational amusement, and which will more gratify the curiosity of the female mind in whatever relates to themselves, than any thing that has hitherto been published[165].

Since the book was primarily intended for women, Alexander wished to adapt its format to the readership he was addressing. Consequently, he suppressed lengthy quotations, technical terms and the long lists of sources which characterised books of scholarly style:

> as the following book was composed solely for the amusement and instruction of the Fair Sex; and as their education is in general less extensive than that of men; in order to render it more intelligible, we have studied the utmost plainness and simplicity of language; have not only totally excluded almost every word that is not English, but even, as much as possible, avoided every technical term.

> As we persuade ourselves, that nothing could be more perplexing to the Sex, or to which they would pay less attention, than a long list of authors on the margin, to shew [sic] from whence we have derived our information, and as a great part of such list would refer to books in other languages, we have entirely omitted it, and contended ourselves with sometimes interweaving into our text, the names and sentiments of such authors as have more peculiarly elucidated the subjects we were investigating[166].

In addition, he sought to avoid excessive dryness and seriousness, which he thought would discourage the female reader.

---

[165] William Alexander, *The History of Women. From the Earliest Antiquity to the Present Time* (London, 1779), Advertisement.

[166] Alexander, *History of Women*, Advertisement.

Instead, he desired to 'mingle pleasure and instruction'[167]. Accordingly, a female readership was clearly in Alexander's mind, as also suggested the prescriptive nature of the book.

However, being also a work of conjectural history, the *History of Women* was undoubtedly meant for male readers too. Following the Scottish Enlightenment's ideas and the path already trodden (partially) by Kames and Millar, Alexander certainly considered that women's vicissitudes in different ages and societies was a worthy scientific pursuit and an essential part of human's course towards progress, which would contribute to the knowledge of the history of mankind as a whole. Accordingly, in spite of his own words, Alexander might have deemed that his book would be of particular interest for philosophers, students of human nature and, overall, for any learned men interested in the evolution and variety of mankind. Not only most of those concerned with these pursuits and questions were men but also, as we have seen, Alexander thought that it should be so, when he excluded women from a formal education.

Even if eighteenth century women had taken an interest in history and were even encouraged to do so, it is unclear that Alexander's text would have been deemed particularly suitable for female sensibilities. His *History of Women* was filled with depictions of barbaric cruelties such as the killing of disabled newborns by Spartan women or Amerindian tortures of captives. It included accounts of the sensualist practices which abounded in the East, of the adulterous customs of savage nations and numberless

[167] Alexander, *History of Women*, Advertisement.

indelicacies, such as descriptions of ritual prostitution or the debauchery of the wealthy and depraved Assyrian women. Alexander openly discussed bodily and sexual matters and, for instance, referred to the embarrassment of the Japanese women in breaking wind, to the Scottish women's shame at being spotted when defecating and to the openness with which contemporary French women discussed menstruation[168].

None of these issues were considered appropriate for the fine and delicate sensibilities of the women of his time and certainly Alexander's critics agreed with this verdict. Accordingly, Alexander's lack of consideration for female sensibility was regretted by some reviewers who regarded his descriptions of the obscene customs and of the instances of abuse women had suffered completely unsuitable for the female reader. In December of 1779 the *History of Women* was assessed in the *Monthly Review* by the editor, William Rose, who wrote a devastating critique of the book. Although he deemed the subject matter worthy of interest ('the title of this work promises a great deal'), it was an enterprise which demanded the highest qualifications and philosophical capacities:

> the writer of such a history ought to be possessed of a variety of talents, which are seldom united in one person; (...) his acquaintance with ancient and modern history ought to be very extensive; (...) much judgement is necessary both in the choice and in the arrangement of his materials; (...) he should have conversed much in the polite world; (...) he should possess great knowledge of the human heart, and that *coup d'œil* in regard to characters and manners which is

[168] See Alexander, *History of Women, II*, chapters 'Of Delicacy and Chastity'.

> absolutely necessary to the successful execution of so difficult a task[169].

However, William Rose did not think that Alexander was endowed with such qualities nor that he had satisfactorily completed the task he had put his mind to. Even if Alexander had 'collected a great variety of particulars relating to the treatment, the employments, and amusements of the fair sex, in different ages and countries, and made some pertinent observations', Rose delivered a harsh condemnation of the whole book. Alexander's remarks were judged 'trite and often frivolous', his materials were 'injudiciously selected and badly arranged', the language was 'inelegant throughout'. 'In short' Rose blatantly summarised, 'we are at a loss to know what class of readers can receive any great pleasure from the perusal of this history'[170].

Rose strongly disagreed with Alexander's portrayal of the Greeks as 'only a few degrees above savage barbarity' due to their lack of politeness and cruel treatment of women. But the main argument of Rose's attack was against Alexander's claim that the book was directed towards female readers. Thus, he wrote,

> it is really surprising that it should not have occurred to the doctor [Alexander] that such ladies (...) must necessarily be shocked with the frequent mention of the very gross and indelicate customs which prevailed in nations that were either only emerging from barbarism or very little advanced in civilization. Of what use, of what importance, can it possibly be to the British fair, to be informed how the

---

169 William Rose, 'Review of Alexander's *History of Women*', *The Monthly Review (or Literary Journal)*, December, (1779), pp. 413-422, p. 414.

170 Rose, 'Monthly Review', p. 413.

> Massagetae, the Ausi, the Lydians, the Scythians, the Bactrians, the Phoenicians, the Aegyptians, &c&c treated their women? Or to be made acquainted with the customs and ceremonies which prevailed among them?[171].

Rose went then on to quote passages from Alexander which he deemed particularly representative of the indelicate nature of the work, such as the first section of the chapter 'Of Delicacy and Chastity', which dealt with the promiscuity and nakedness commonly found among savage societies. Such was Rose's disapproval of the material included by Alexander that he misrepresented the nature of the book, failing to note the diverse topics and sources the book covered and the fact that Alexander also included instances of virtuous female behaviour and moralising comments on female chastity and delicacy. Certainly, Rose was reluctant to subscribe to Alexander's cautions regarding the flaws of his work and show the lenience which he asked for in the advertisement to the first edition of the book:

> we hope our candid Readers will make some allowances for our having trod a path which has never been attempted before, and the ladies, we flatter ourselves, will treat us with some indulgence, when we assure them, that we have exerted our utmost abilities to put their history into the most engaging dress, and to mingle pleasure with instruction[172].

Therefore, even if Alexander intended his book for women, a significant number among the people of his time thought that the

---

[171] Rose, 'Monthly Review', p. 415.

[172] Alexander, *History of Women*, Advertisement.

History of Women was not suitable for women. Women should be allowed and even encouraged to read history but not every book of history was fitting for the female reader. History should furnish women with moral lessons and virtuous examples from which they could learn how perform their duties and behave in a way becoming to their sex. Human nature would be better portrayed to women through books on the lives of praiseworthy women or by those conforming to the classical pattern which focused on courtly politics and political and military history. However, a conjectural history of women, which dealt with a varied and uncensored amount of data on the human past, was certainly not suitable for women and should be kept out of their reach.

SENSIBILITY AND THE WRITING AND READING OF HISTORY

During the eighteenth century, the writing of history underwent important changes through which traditional paradigms were substituted and challenged by novel forms of writing history, which not only enlarged history's scope but also its readership and the reading practices it demanded. Several factors have been identified as productive of these changes, among which the culture of sensibility should be noticed[173].

---

[173] See J. G. Pocock, 'Classical and Civil History. The Transformation of Humanism.' *Cromohs (online journal)*, 1, (1996), pp. 1-34, available at http://www.unifi.it/riviste/cromohs/1_96/pocock.html, accessed 23 May 2004; Moran, *From Rudeness to Refinement*, pp. 34-39, Mark Salber Phillips, '"If Mrs. Mure Be not Sorry for Poor King Charles": History, the Novel and the Sentimental Reader', *History Workshop Journal*, 43, (1997), pp. 110-131 and Mark

As Pocock has argued, the classical paradigm was the mode of historical writing which predominated in Britain on the eve of the eighteenth century. Although this paradigm was rooted in Greek and Roman Antiquity, it had survived relatively unchallenged until modern times. According to this conception, history was 'supposed to be a record of the deeds of great men, or of great peoples, in the persons of their kings, captains and magistrates, written by the protagonists themselves, or by participants in or witnesses of their actions, and preserved in writing and in memory'[174].

In the eighteenth century new forms of historical writing emerged, calling into question the classical emphasis on the public deeds of public men. Even if the paradigm of classical history still carried enormous prestige and remained powerful and respected, its authority was undermined by novel modes of historical writing which focused on the inner, everyday lives of private men and expanded classical history's scant attention to contexts and long-term processes. Thus, conjectural history emerged, alongside a diverse assortment of genres, such as religious history, history of manners, history of sciences and literature, memoir and biography. These genres maintained a complex relation with classical history, defining themselves in relation to it and adopting some of its premises while, at the same time, contesting history's strict

---

Salber Phillips, *Society and Sentiment. Genres of Historical Writing in Britain 1740-1820* (Princeton, 2000).

174 Pocock, 'Classical and Civil History', p. 2.

identification with public life and assumptions about audience and gender[175].

The rise of a middle class and commercial Britain fostered historiographical changes. As Mark Salber Phillips has argued, new conceptions of history emerged from a 'desire to overcome the inadequacy of the inherited instruments of historical writing when measured by the needs and questions of contemporary audiences'[176]. The classical paradigm, with its emphasis on military deeds suited an aristocratic audience rather than the emerging new classes that owed their wealth to commercialisation and saw little they could identify with in the traditional history of high politics and heroic feats. In addition, as the aristocratic ethos declined and the middle classes witnessed their fortunes rise, commerce became a matter of state and thus a legitimate and pressing interest for history to pursue. As Mark Salber Phillips has suggested,

> despite the continuous prestige of classical literary models, their exclusion of commerce could not survive the conditions of writing in a modern commercial nation. At stake was the self-recognition of a society keenly aware of how much it owed to the power of trade. Inherited traditions of historical narrative needed to be reshaped so that the political class of a commercial empire could examine and celebrate a history recognizable of their own[177].

Conjectural history was certainly a genre the commercial classes could recognise themselves in because of its rejection of

---

[175] Phillips, *Society and Sentiment*.

[176] Phillips, *Society and Sentiment*, p. 7.

[177] Phillips, *Society and Sentiment*, p. 16.

prominent historical figures as the main actors of the narrative, and its focus on the interplay of different factors in the evolution of societies, which were conceived as aggregates of anonymous individuals. In addition, novel forms of historical writing challenged the classical identification between the historian and public life and involvement in politics. Eighteenth century novel historical conceptions considered that the labour of the historian could be successfully practised by private individuals detached from the main centres of political power[178].

In addition, recent religious controversies and factional disputes were often associated with traditional ways of understanding history. Their end was cherished as the proof that the virtues attendant upon commercial societies outdid the dated values of their classical predecessors. This belief was at the heart of the 'quarrel of the ancients and moderns', in which some argued for the modern capacity to excel according to ancient standards, whereas others claimed values which challenged and even negated those at which the ancients had aimed. As Pocock has remarked, 'the collision – it is not a balance – between admiration and condemnation articulates the essence of the eighteenth century's view of antiquity'[179].

However, the culture of sensibility should also be noted as an influential factor in the changes in historical paradigms. Just as sensibility emphasised the privileged role of feelings in sociability and virtue, new historical genres focused on the private passions

---

[178] Phillips, *Society and Sentiment* and Pocock, 'Classical and Civil History'.

[179] Pocock, 'Classical and Civil History', pp. 8 and 1.

and experiences of historical actors. Elements of private life, such as manners, family and women's historical experience were given the same status, and sometimes even a greater importance, than public actions and political deeds.

In tune with sensibility's doctrines, which endowed women with qualities essential for maintaining private and public virtue alike, new historical genres allowed women to emerge as prominent historical actors and even as writers of history. While conjectural history located society, rather than the battlefield, as the major site of historical change, it also replaced men by 'man' as the main historical actor, a term which, although was certainly male biased, was often used to designate the historical experience of both sexes. Even if history was still a genre scarcely taken up by women, the eighteenth century witnessed the emergence of some female historians who even enjoyed some success and respect, such as Elizabeth Hamilton. By contrast, the classical paradigm involved a strong identification between history and men, who were both the main historical actors and writers[180].

As the new genres of historical writing gathered momentum, many writers reconceived the reader's engagement with historical narratives in more inward and sentimental terms. The reading of history was traditionally regarded as a male activity which required rational and serene judgement, seriousness and constancy. Reading history should lead to the moral improvement of the reader and

[180] Phillips, *Society and Sentiment*, Pocock, 'Classical and Civil History' and Jane Rendall, 'Writing History for British Women: Elisabeth Hamilton and the *Memoirs of Agrippina*', in Clarissa Campbell Orr (ed.), *Wollstonecraft's Daughters. Womanhood in England and France 1780-1920* (Manchester & New York, 1996), pp. 79-93.

was not supposed to be a source of pleasure. Just as history was considered to furnish the reader with moral lessons mainly concerning public life, its readership was represented as an active, male subject, engaged in public activities[181].

However, in the second half of the eighteenth century conjectural historians, such as Kames, and philosophers, like Godwin, championed interiorised, inward ways of reading which required qualities traditionally associated with women. Both authors encouraged the reader to cultivate a sympathetic identification and even a dreamy self-forgetting, qualities which had been related to the feminine readership of novels. William Godwin commended rapturous absorption and self-forgetting identification with the author and the plot as praiseworthy qualities of sentimental reading. Kames, on his part, advocated a degree of touching vividness as one of the main virtues of fiction of any kind, a quality by which the reader was swept into a vicarious emotional experience. In order to fully benefit from the reading activity, the writing should skilfully aim at this objective and the reader should be wholly receptive, that is, endowed with the virtues of sympathy and fine sensibility[182].

Sensibility's values were thus embraced by the new historians. Although history's claims to impartiality persisted, the new historians sought to appeal to the sensibility of the reader and create a sympathetic identification with the historical characters

---

[181] See Phillips, *Society and Sentiment*, pp. 103-128, Phillips, '"If Mrs. Mure Be not Sorry for Poor King Charles"' and Pocock, 'Classical and Civil History'.

[182] See Phillips, '"If Mrs. Mure Be not Sorry for Poor King Charles"' and Phillips, *Society and Sentiment*, pp. 103-128.

and their fate, arousing in the reader feelings of compassion and pity. As Hume put it, 'the first Quality of an Historian is to be true and impartial; the next to be interesting. If you do not say, that I have done both Parties Justice; and if Mrs Mure be not sorry for poor King Charles, I shall burn my Papers, and return to Philosophy'[183].

These new forms of reading also modified the perception of history's capacity for providing moral lessons. In order to better profit from history's potential for self-improvement and moral instruction, the flow of sympathies should be encouraged by the writer, while the reader should let himself be carried away by the rapturous self-forgetting. In addition, as conjectural history shows, history tried to encourage the virtues associated with sensibility (such as politeness, humanity and domesticity) in the reader, virtues which were often of a private rather than public nature. Even Adam Ferguson, who remained faithful to the stoic and civic humanist standards of virtue, subscribed this view,

> as actors or spectators, we are perpetually made to feel the difference of human conduct, and from a bare recital of transactions which had passed in ages and countries remote to our own, are moved with admiration and pity, or transported with indignation and rage. Our sensibility on this subject gives their charm, in retirement, to the relations of history, and to the fictions of poetry; sends forth the tear of compassion, gives to the blood its briskest movement, and to the eye its liveliest glances of displeasure or joy[184].

---

[183] Quoted in Phillips, '"If Mrs. Mure Be not Sorry for Poor King Charles"', p. 111.

[184] Ferguson, *History of Civil Society*, p. 36.

History's moralising purpose, essential to the classical paradigm, was further emphasised by the language of sensibility. The advocates of sensibility repeatedly praised the potential of reading for self-improvement and fostering virtue. The written word had, according to the culture of sensibility, a proven capacity to influence and direct people's sensibilities and feelings. Reading was essential for the refinement of sensibility and the cultivation of the mind necessary for polite conversation. Stirring the reader's empathic potential, adequate reading matters and literary styles would contribute to bring about the sensitive frame of mind advocated by the discourse of sensibility, fostering private and public virtue alike. As we have seen, the novel was often conceived as a means to extend sensibility's reforming aim and instil tender affections as opposed to the insensitivity of the 'world'.

Just as the classical historical paradigm's stress on instruction did not fade with the emergence of new genres of historical writing, history's reference to public matters did not disappear, nor did the reading habits associated with public instruction. Similarly, history continued to be often represented by its appropriateness to an active, adult, male reader, whose interests and capacities were contrasted to the youthful, feminine and private readership ascribed to the novel. In spite of the challenges, the classical paradigm persisted well into modern times[185].

[185] Phillips, *Society and Sentiment* and Pocock, 'Classical and Civil History'.

Conclusion

In this PhD thesis William Alexander's *History of Women* has been analysed using a gender approach with the aim of placing it in the intellectual context of the Scottish Enlightenment. Therefore, little attention has been paid to intellectual factors that go beyond the Scottish milieu or to analogous works which were produced outside the Scottish background. It would be most interesting to place Alexander's enquiry on a broader historiographical background, which would certainly contribute to a better understanding of the book itself as well as the beginnings of historical writing about women.

The Scottish Enlightenment informed Alexander's task of writing a history of women. He shared with the Scottish conjectural historians a belief that women's condition was a mark of the degree of progress a society had achieved, a vindication of

women as valid historical subjects, a tension between progressivism and conservatism as well as historiographical methods and underlying ideas and assumptions.

Conjectural history could be considered an intellectual development concomitant to the eighteenth century quest for a science of man which, inspired by the success of the scientific revolution, adopted its methods and basic tenets, seeking to delve into the study of human nature and the evolution of human faculties. The authors of the Scottish Enlightenment assumed eagerly this project, focusing primarily on the social and endowing their enquiries with the rationalism, secularism and the quest for general causes they admired in the natural sciences. Following the pull of the Newtonian revolution and seeking inspiration in previous authors, the Scottish Enlightenment perfected the four stages theory, a methodological tool with which the totality of human evolution could be ordered and explained through general causes. As we have seen, the approaches and methodological assumptions of the Scottish Enlightenment were used by Alexander in his *History of Women* which, like the Scottish enquiries on society, put little emphasis on the individual and turned to material from different sources to articulate his exploration of women's passage through time. Just as in the case of the Scottish authors, Alexander's extensive use of travel literature brought his research close to works of an anthropological nature.

However, to fully understand the milieu in which the book was produced and the ideas which infused the writings of Alexander, a historical overview was necessary. We have considered Alexander's work as the product of his historical

circumstances. The evolution of women's roles and situation within British society help to understand many of his concerns and conclusions. It has been argued that the final decades of the eighteenth century witnessed a transformation of women's condition which went hand in hand with a moment of instability of gender identities, linked to discussions on women's role in society and changing circumstances of a political, economic and social kind. In this milieu, an enquiry on the evolution of women through time and place was more easily accepted and less difficult to undertake. In addition, the alteration of traditional patterns of work, leisure, family life and sociability heightened anxieties about the proper way in which gender relations should be conducted thus prompting historical and philosophical reflections on women's nature, duties and condition.

Likewise, political circumstances help to explain both Alexander's and the Scottish ideas. The incorporation of Scotland to the Union (1707) spurred concerns about the protection of private and public virtue in front of growing commercialisation, the spread of consumerism and the expansion of imperial possessions. Certainly, so many benefits had to have a negative counterpart. Thus, the reflection on the relation between the sexes was paralleled and compared to rising standards of wealth for both were productive of countless benefits but could easily lead to moral corruption and the destruction of the community. Similarly, Alexander's vindication of the situation of her female British counterparts as the peak of an evolution of women's condition towards better treatment, respect and advancement has its roots in the process of anglicisation which Scotland experienced after the

Union and which had in the authors of the Scottish Enlightenment many of its keenest advocates. However, just as Scotland's position within the Union could be improved, women's condition could also be bettered although within limits clearly set by the protection of family life, public and private virtue and gender hierarchies.

In the same manner, tensions arise when considering the discourses which grounded the Scottish Enlightenment's and Alexander's discourses of femininity. Women's influence in society was clearly productive of many benefits. Men's rougher nature was polished by the company of women while private and public virtue alike were fostered by women's finer sensibility, their role as promoters of polite sociability and their position as safeguards of domestic family life. Nevertheless, Alexander's evaluation of women's duties and innate qualities, like his Scottish counterparts', was fraught with paradoxes. While the association between women and culture was used to endorse the positive role played by women in the civilising process, the identification between women and nature prevailed in order to advocate a private role for women as carers and nurturers and support a moral double standard which was disadvantageous for women. Similarly, the development of the sciences and the arts, which marked the attainment of significant levels of progress and civility, was barred for women, who run the risk of forsaking the all important male affections for a learned life which, due to their weaker sensibilities, was only conductive to pedantry and failure. Eventually, women's important role in society was only acknowledged as long as it suited gender hierarchies and, thus, women remained trapped in domestic yet unequal marriages, subjected to a male biased code of morality and barred from

political rights, full education and professional careers, in short, from equality.

Sensibility played a key role in the Scottish Enlightenment's discussions of femininity and women's role in society. Sensibility, when properly cultivated, was thought to bring about countless benefits for both sexes and society. Sensibility was at the heart of morality, through the operations of sympathy, softened male nature and enabled polite sociability, which was the basis of social life and the spur to public and private virtue alike. A denunciation of masculine brutality and rough habits was the consequence of the spread of the discourse of sensibility. Regarding women, praise of their beneficial influence over men, family and society stemmed from beliefs on women's more delicate sensibility. In this respect, women's tendency to humane feelings of compassion and pity was commended and even considered a mark of superiority over men. The literature of sensibility explored the reconciliation of passion and social conventions, which was particularly relevant for women, and drew attention to female sexual passion.

However, an excessive sensibility was productive of dangers and deficiencies which were more acute in the case of women, since sensibility was more deeply rooted in their nature. Accordingly, the discourse of sensibility was also used to support ideas about women of a more prescriptive nature, as the analysis of Alexander's *History of Women* alongside Gregory's *A Father's Legacy to his Daughters* prove. A restrictive ideology of femininity permeated the works of both authors, whose claims to the vocabulary of sensibility endowed them with a soft yet authoritative voice while, at the same time, produced a tension

between their appraisal of women's enhanced nature, their moralising aims and their emphasis on the pitfalls of sensibility in the feminine self. Therefore, without denying the influence of the enlightened principles on Alexander's project, the *History of Women* should be considered a blend of conjectural history and prescriptive literature in which both genres often clashed producing paradoxes. Nevertheless, the contradictions which appear in Alexander's work are mainly the necessary result of the true nature of the book which reveals the close links and complementary relation between conjectural history and prescriptive literature. If conjectural history sought to trace society's path towards progress, highlighting women's role in it, prescriptive literature was aimed to protect the advancement thus achieved, even at the cost of sacrificing many of the claims to an equal treatment of women and to their privileged position which surfaced in conjectural history. Both genres, in addition, were mostly concerned with channelling of male sexuality through ordered practices and secure institutions, thus ensuring the continuance of society without endangering its moral basis.

The discourse of sensibility has been also considered in relation to the appreciation of history. The vocabulary of sensibility brought about new ways of reading history, which demanded empathy and quickness of feeling, qualities which the female reader was supposed to naturally possess. However, even if history was thus related to female nature and commended as part of a sound female education, the scope of women's learning was also limited by the discourse of sensibility. Women's finer sensibility endangered their sound judgement and could easily be

upset by works which departed from the strictest standards of modesty. Conjectural history was not regarded as highly suitable for women due to the use of materials on barbarous societies and customs, and the emphasis on marital arrangements which went against decency. Alexander's book, which included plenty of information on primitive sexuality, savage practices and oriental sensualism, was severely criticised as extremely inappropriate for female readers. It is thus unlikely that Alexander's book reached the large female readership that he had in mind and to whom he directed his moralising considerations.

It has been the underlying aim of this PhD thesis to bring attention to this work and stress the interest which for the student of the evolution of gender relations, women's history and historiography the book should have. It is our hope that our research had helped to draw attention to the significant position of the *History of Women* among the first histories of women and to point out its place as a forerunner of current feminist investigations on the vicissitudes of women's situation through time and place.

References

Alexander, William, (1779 ed.) *The History of Women. From the Earliest Antiquity to the Present Time* (Bristol, 1995), 2 vols.

Alexander, William, *The History of Women. From the Earliest Antiquity to the Present Time* (London, 1779)

Anderson, Bonnie S. and Zinsser, Judith P., *Historia de las mujeres: una historia propia* (Barcelona, 1992), vol. 2

Arendt, Hannah, *Rahel Varnhagen. Vida de una mujer judía* (Barcelona, 2000)

Armstrong, Nancy and Tennenhouse, Leonard, 'The Literature of Conduct, the Conduct of Literature and the Politics of Desire. An Introduction', in Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse (eds.), *The Ideology of Conduct* (London & New York, 1987), pp. 1-24

Armstrong, Nancy, *Desire and Domestic Fiction. A Political History of the Novel* (Oxford & New York, 1986)

Astell, Mary, *Reflections upon Marriage and other Writings* (Hants, 1986)

Austen, Jane, (1811) *Sense and Sensibility* (London, 1974)

Austen, Jane, (1813) *Pride and Prejudice* (London, 1987)

Austen, Jane, (1814) *Mansfield Park* (London, 1973)

Austen, Jane, (1816) *Emma* (London, 1983)

Austen, Jane, (1818) *Northanger Abbey* (Hardmonthsworth, 1973)

Baier, Annette C., 'Hume on Women's Complexion', in Peter Jones (ed.), *The Science of Man in the Scottish Enlightenment. Hume, Reid and their Contemporaries* (Edinburgh, 1989)

Bailyn, Bernard and Morgan, Philip D. (eds.), *Strangers within the Realm. Cultural Margins of the First British Empire* (Chapel Hill & London, 1991)

Barker, Hannah and Chalus, Elaine (eds.), *Gender in Eighteenth Century England. Roles, Representations and Responsibilities* (London & New York, 1997)

Barker-Benfield, G. J., 'Mary Wollstonecraft: Eighteenth Century Commonwealth Woman', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 50, (1989), pp. 95-116

Barker-Benfield, G. J., *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth Century Britain* (Chicago, 1992)

Bayly, C. A., 'The British and Indigenous Peoples, 1760-1860: Power, Perception and Identity', in Martin Daunton and Rick Halpern (eds.), *Empire and Others: British Encounters with Indigenous Peoples, 1600-1850* (Philadelphia, 1999)

Beaglehole, J. C., 'Eighteenth Century Science and the Voyages of Discovery', *New Zealand Journal of History*, 3, (1969), pp. 107-123

Beveridge, Craig, 'Childhood and Society in Eighteenth Century Scotland', in John Dwyer, Roger Mason and Alexander Murdoch (eds.), *New Perspectives on Politics and Culture of Early Modern Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1982), pp. 265-290

Blair, Hugh, *Sermons* (London, 1834)

Bohls, Elizabeth A., *Women Travel Writers and the Language of Aesthetics, 1716-1818* (Cambridge, 1995)

Bolufer Peruga, Mónica and Morant Deusa, Isabel, 'On Women's Reason, Education and Love', *Gender and History*, (1998), pp. 183-216

Boucé, Paul-Gabriel, 'Some Sexual Beliefs and Myths in Eighteenth Century Britain', in Paul-Gabriel Boucé (ed.), *Sexuality in Eighteenth Century Britain* (Totowa, New Jersey, 1982), pp. 28-46

Bowen, H. V., *Elites, Enterprise and the Making of the British Overseas Empire, 1688-1775* (London, 1996)

Brewer, John, *Party Ideology and Popular Politics at the Accession of George III* (Cambridge, 1976)

Brewer, John, 'This, That and the Other: Public, Social and Private in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries', in Dario Castiglione and Lesley Sharpe (eds.), *Shifting the Boundaries: Transformations of the Languages of Public and Private in the Eighteenth Century* (Exeter, 1995), pp. 1-21

Brown, Vivienne, '"Mere Inventions of the Imagination". A Survey of Recent Literature on Adam Smith', *Economics and Philosophy*, 13, (1997), pp. 281-312

Carter, Philip, *Men and the Emergence of Polite Society, 1660-1800* (Harlow, England & New York, 2001)

Chartier, Roger, *The Cultural Origins of the French Revolution* (Durham & London, 1991)

Chitnis, Anand C., *The Scottish Enlightenment: A Social History* (Totowa, New Jersey, 1976)

Clark, Anna, *The Struggle for the Breeches: Gender and the Making of the British Working Class* (Berkeley & Los Angeles, 1995)

Clark, Henry C., 'Women and Humanity in Scottish Social Thought: The Case of Adam Smith', *Historical Reflections*, 19, (1993), pp. 335-361

Cohen, Estelle, '"What the Women at All Times Would Laugh at". Redefining Equality and Difference, *circa* 1660-1760', *Osiris*, 12, (1997), pp. 121-142

Colley, Linda, *Britons. Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (New Haven & London, 1992)

Colwill, Elizabeth, 'Just another Citoyenne? Marie Antoinette on Trial, 1790-1793', *History Workshop Journal*, 28, (1989), pp. 63-87

Conway, Stephen, *The British Isles and the War of American Independence* (Oxford, 2000)

Craveri, Benedetta, *La cultura de la conversación* (Madrid, 2003)

Daston, Lorraine and Park, Katharine, 'The Hermaphrodite and the Orders of Nature. Sexual Ambiguity in Modern France', *CLQ*, 1, (1995), pp. 419-438

Davidoff, Leonore and Hall, Catherine, *Fortunas familiares. Hombres y mujeres de la clase media inglesa, 1780-1850* (Madrid, 1987)

de Groot, Joanna, '"Sex" and "Race"; the Formation of Language and Image in the Nineteenth Century', in Susan Mendus and Jane Rendall (eds.), *Sexuality and Subordination* (London, 1989), pp. 89-128

Defoe, Daniel, (1722) *Moll Flanders* (New York & London, 2004)

Dwyer, John, 'Clio and Ethics: Practical Morality in Enlightened Scotland', *The Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation*, 30, (1989)

Dwyer, John, *The Age of the Passions. An Interpretation of Adam Smith and the Scottish Enlightenment* (East Lothian, 1998)

Dwyer, John, *Virtuous Discourse: Sensibility and Community in Eighteenth Century Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1987)

Elias, Norbert, *El proceso de la civilización. Investigaciones sociogenéticas y psicogenéticas* (Madrid, 1993)

Emerson, Roger L., 'Conjectural History and Scottish Philosophers', *Historical Papers/Communications historiques [of the Canadian Historical Association]*, (1984), pp. 63-90

Emerson, Roger L., 'Science and the Origins and Concerns of the Scottish Enlightenment', *History of Science*, 26, (1988), pp. 333-365

Emerson, Roger L., 'The Scottish Literati and America, 1680-1800', in Ned C. Landsman (ed.), *Nation and Province in the First British Empire* (London: Lewisburg, 2007), pp. 183-220

Fagerstrom, Dalphy I., 'Scottish Opinion and the American Revolution', *William and Mary Quarterly*, 11, (1954), pp. 252-275

Ferguson, Adam, (1767 ed.) *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (Edinburgh, 1966)

Fletcher, Anthony, *Gender, Sex and Subordination in England, 1500-1800* (New Haven & London, 1995)

Folbre, Nancy, '"The Improper Arts". Sex in Classical Political Economy', *Population and Development Review*, 18, (1992), pp. 105-122

Foucault, Michel, *Historia de la sexualidad* (Madrid, 1987-1989), 3 vols.

Foucault, Michel, *Las palabras y las cosas. Una arqueología de las ciencias humanas* (Madrid, 1978)

Fox, Christopher, Porter, Roy and Wokler, Robert (eds.), *Inventing Human Science. Eighteenth Century Domains* (Berkeley & Los Angeles, 1995)

Gillis, John R., *For Better for Worse. British Marriages, 1600 to the Present* (Oxford & New York, 1985)

Gould, Eliga H., 'American Independence and Britain's Counter-Revolution', *Past and Present*, 154, (1997), pp. 107-141

Gregory, John, (1774 ed.) *A Comparative View of the State and Faculties of Man with Those of the Animal World* (London & Tokyo, 1994)

Grosrichard, Alain, *Estructura del harén. La ficción del despotismo asiático en el Occidente clásico* (Barcelona, 1979)

Harcourt, Glenn, 'Andreas Vesalius and the Anatomy of Antique Sculpture', *Representations*, 0, (1987), pp. 28-61

Hayley, William, *Philosophical, Historical and Moral Essay in Old Maids by a Friend to the Sisterhood* (London, 1785)

Herrup, Cynthia, 'The Patriarch at Home. The Trial of the Second Earl of Castlehaven for Rape and Sodomy', *History Workshop Journal*, 41, (1996), pp. 117-141

Higginbotham, Evelyn Brooks, 'African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race', *Signs*, 17, (1992), pp. 251-274

Hill, Bridget, 'Women's History: A Study in Change, Continuity or Standing Still?' *Women's History Review*, 2, (1993), pp. 173-184

Honeyman, Katrina, *Women, Gender and Industrialisation in England, 1700-1870* (London, 2000)

Hont, Istvan and Ignatieff, Michael (eds.), *Wealth and Virtue. The Shaping of Political Economy in the Scottish Enlightenment* (Cambridge, 1983)

Höpfl, H. M., 'From Savage to Scotsman: Conjectural History in the Scottish Enlightenment', *Journal of British Studies*, 17, (1978)

Hufton, Olwen H., *The Prospect before Her. A History of Women in Western Europe* (London, 1995)

Hufton, Olwen H., *Women and the Limits of Citizenship in the French Revolution* (Toronto, 1989)

Hume, David, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Oxford, 2003)

Hume, David, *Selected Essays* (Oxford, 1998)

Hunt, Lynn, *Politics, Culture and Class in the French Revolution* (Berkeley & Los Angeles, 1984)

Hunt, Lynn, *The Family Romance of the French Revolution* (London, 1992)

Hunt, Margaret, *The Middling Sort. Commerce, Gender and Family in England, 1680-1780* (Berkeley, Los Angeles & London, 1996)

Jones, Vivien, 'The Seductions of Conduct: Pleasure and Conduct Literature', in Roy Porter and Marie Mulvey Roberts (eds.), *Pleasure in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1996), pp. 108-132

Jones, Vivien, *Women in the Eighteenth Century: Constructions of Femininity* (London & New York, 1990)

Jordanova, Ludmilla, *Nature Displayed. Gender, Science and Medicine, 1760-1820* (London & New York, 1999)

Jordanova, Ludmilla, *Sexual Visions. Images of Gender in Science and Medicine between the Eighteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Madison, Wisconsin, 1989)

Kames, Lord, (1778 ed.) *Sketches of the History of Man* (London, 1993), 4 vols.

Kelly, Joan, 'Early Feminist Theory and "the Querelle des Femmes", 1400-1789', in Joan Kelly (ed.), *Women, History and Theory* (Chicago, 1984), pp. 65-109

Kidd, Colin, 'North Britishness and the Nature of Eighteenth Century British Patriotisms', *The Historical Journal*, 39, (1996), pp. 361-382

Kingsley Kent, Susan, *Gender and Power in Britain, 1640-1990* (London & New York, 1999)

Klein, Lawrence, 'Gender and the Public/Private Distinction in the Eighteenth Century: Some Questions about Evidence and Analytic Procedure', *Eighteenth Century Studies*, 29, (1995), pp. 97-109

Kuiper, Edith, 'The Construction of a Masculine Identity in Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*', in Drucilla Barker, K. and Edith Kuiper (eds.), *Toward a Feminist Philosophy of Economics* (London & New York, 2003), pp. 145-161

Landes, Joan B., *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca & London, 1996)

Landsman, Ned C., 'The Provinces and the Empire. Scotland, the American Colonies and the Development of British Provincial Identity', in Lawrence Stone (ed.), *An Imperial State at War. Britain from 1689 to 1815* (London & New York, 1994), pp. 258-287

Langford, Paul, *A Polite and Commercial People. England, 1727-1783* (Oxford, 1989)

Lawrence, Anne, *Women in England, 1500-1760* (London, 1994)

Lawrence, Christopher, 'The Nervous System and Society in the Scottish Enlightenment', in Barry Barnes and Steven Shapin (eds.), *Natural Order. Historical Studies of Scientific Culture* (Beverly Hills & London, 1979), pp. 19-40

Levine, Philippa, *The Amateur and the Professional* (Cambridge, 1994)

Lew, Joseph W., 'Lady Mary's Portable Seraglio', *Eighteenth Century Studies*, 24, (1991), pp. 432-450

Lewis, Reina, *Gendering the Exotic. Race, Femininity and Representation* (London & New York, 1996)

Lovejoy, Arthur O., *The Great Chain of Being. A Study of the History of an Idea* (Cambridge, 1982)

Lowe, Lisa, *Critical Terrains. French and British Orientalisms* (Ithaca & London, 1991)

Mackenzie, Henry, *Julia de Roubigné* (East Lothian, 1999)

Mackenzie, Henry, *The Man of Feeling* (London & New York, 1958)

Marshall, P. J. and Williams, Glyndwr, *The Great Map of Mankind. Perceptions of New Worlds in the Age of Enlightenment* (London, 1982)

Marshall, P. J., *The Oxford History of the British Empire. The Eighteenth Century* (Oxford & New York, 1998), Vol. II

Martín Gaite, Carmen, *Usos amorosos del dieciocho en España* (Madrid, 1987)

McKeon, M., 'Historising Patriarchy: The Emergence of Gender Difference in England, 1660-1760', *Eighteenth Century Studies*, 28, (1995), pp. 295-322

Meek, Ronald L., *Social Science and the Ignoble Savage* (Cambridge, 1976)

Melman, Billie, *Woman's Orients: English Women and the Middle East, 1718-1918* (London, 1995)

Millar, John, (1779 ed.) *The Origin of the Distinction of Ranks*, repr. in Lehmann, W. C., *John Millar of Glasgow, 1735-1801. His Life and his Contribution to Sociological Analysis* (Glasgow, 1960)

Miller, Paula, *Transformations of Patriarchy in the West, 1500-1900* (Indiana & Bloomington, 1998)

Molina Petit, Cristina, *Dialéctica feminista de la Ilustración* (Madrid, 1994)

Moller Okin, Susan, 'Patriarchy and Married Women's Property in England. Questions about Some Current Views', *Eighteenth Century Studies*, 17, (1983/84), pp. 121-139

Moran, Mary Catherine, '"The Commerce of the Sexes": Civil Society and Polite Society in Scottish Enlightenment Discourse', in Frank Trentmann (ed.), *Paradoxes of Civil Society: New Perspectives on Modern German and British History* (Providence, 1999), pp. 61-84

Moran, Mary Catherine, *From Rudeness to Refinement. Gender, Genre and Scottish Enlightenment* (unpublished PhD thesis, 1999)

More, Hannah, *Strictures on Female Education* (Oxford & New York, 1995), 2 vols.

Mullan, John, *Sentiment and Sociability: The Language of Feeling in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 1988)

Nussbaum, Felicity A., *Torrid Zones. Maternity, Sexuality and Empire in Eighteenth Century English Narratives* (Baltimore & London, 1995)

Nyland, Chris, 'Adam Smith, Stage Theory and the Status of Women', *History of Political Economy*, 25, (1993), pp. 617-640

Outram, Dorinda, *The Body and the French Revolution. Sex, Class and Political Culture* (New Haven & London, 1989)

Pagden, Anthony, *European Encounters with the New World: From Renaissance to Romanticism* (New Haven, 1993)

Perrot, Michelle, *Writing Women's History* (Oxford, 1992)

Perry, Ruth, 'Colonizing the Breast: Sexuality and Maternity in Eighteenth Century England', in John C. Fout (ed.), *Forbidden History. The State, Society and the Regulation of Sexuality in Modern Europe* (Chicago and London, 1992), pp. 107-137

Phillips, Mark Salber, '"If Mrs. Mure Be not Sorry for Poor King Charles": History, the Novel and the Sentimental Reader', *History Workshop Journal*, 43, (1997), pp. 110-131

Phillips, Mark Salber, *Society and Sentiment. Genres of Historical Writing in Britain 1740-1820* (Princeton, 2000)

Phillipson, N. T., 'Scottish Public Opinion and the Union in the Age of the Association', in N. T. Phillipson and Rosalind Mitchison (eds.), *Scotland in the Age of Improvement* (Edinburgh, 1970)

Phillipson, N. T., 'Towards a Definition of the Scottish Enlightenment', in David Williams Paul Fritz (ed.), *City and Society in the Eighteenth Century* (Toronto, 1973), pp. 125-147

Pick, Christopher (ed.) *Embassy to Constantinople. The Travels of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu* (London, 1988)

Pocock, J. G. A., *Virtue, Commerce and History* (New York, 1985)

Pocock, J. G., 'Classical and Civil History. The Transformation of Humanism.' *Cromohs (online journal)*, 1, (1996), pp. 1-34

Pollock, Linda, 'Embarking on a Rough Passage: The Experience of Pregnancy in Early Modern Society', in Valerie Fildes (ed.), *Women as Mothers in Pre-Industrial England* (London & New York, 1990), pp. 39-67

Pomata, Gianna, 'History, Particular and Universal: On Reading Some Recent Women's History Textbooks', *Feminist Studies*, 19, (1993), pp. 7-50

Porter, Roy, 'Mixed Feelings: The Enlightenment and Sexuality in Eighteenth Century Britain', in Paul-Gabriel Boucé (ed.), *Sexuality in Eighteenth Century Britain* (Totowa, New Jersey, 1982), pp. 1-27

Prest, Wilfrid, *Albion Ascendant. English History, 1660-1815* (New York, 1998)

Puleo, Alicia H. (ed.) *La ilustración olvidada. La polémica de los sexos en el siglo XVIII* (Madrid, 1993)

Rendall, Jane, 'Alexander, Dr. William (1742-1788?)', in H. C. G. Matthew (ed.), *The New Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004)

Rendall, Jane, 'Clio, Mars and Minerva: the Scottish Enlightenment and the Writing of Women's History', in T. M. Devine and

J. R. Young (eds.), *Eighteenth Century Scotland. New Perspectives* (East Linton, 1999), pp. 134-151

Rendall, Jane, 'Feminizing the Enlightenment: The Problem of Sensibility', in Martin Fitzpatrick, Peter Jones and Iain McCalman (eds.), *The Enlightenment World* (London, 2004), pp. 253-271

Rendall, Jane, 'Nineteenth Century Feminism and the Separation of Spheres: Reflections on the Public/Private Dichotomy', in Tayo Andreasen and *et al.* (eds.), *Moving on. New Perspectives on the Women's Movement* (Aarhus, 1990), pp. 17-37

Rendall, Jane, 'Tacitus Engendered: "Gothic Feminism" and British Histories, c. 1750-1800', in Geoffrey Cubitt (ed.), *Imagining Nations* (Manchester & New York, 1998), pp. 57-74

Rendall, Jane, 'Virtue and Commerce: Women in the Making of Adam Smith's Political Economy', in Ellen Kennedy and Susan Mendus (eds.), *Women in Western Political Philosophy* (Brighton, 1987)

Rendall, Jane, 'Women and the Public Sphere', *Gender and History*, 11, (1999), pp. 475-488

Rendall, Jane, 'Writing History for British Women: Elisabeth Hamilton and the *Memoirs of Agrippina*', in Clarissa Campbell Orr (ed.), *Wollstonecraft's Daughters. Womanhood in England and France 1780-1920* (Manchester & New York, 1996), pp. 79-93

Richards, Eric, 'Scotland and the Uses of the Atlantic Empire', in Bernard Bailyn and Philip D. Morgan (eds.), *Strangers within the Realm. Cultural Margins of the First British Empire* (Chapel Hill & London, 1991), pp. 67-114

Richardson, Samuel, *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded* (London, 2003)

Richter, Melvin, 'Montesquieu's Theory and Practice of the Comparative Method', *History of the Human Sciences*, 15, (2002), pp. 21-33

Riley, Denise, *Am I that Name? Feminism and the Category of "Women" in History* (London, 1988)

Rogers, Katherine, *Feminism in Eighteenth Century England* (Brighton, 1982)

Romerales, Enrique, *El pensamiento británico hasta la Ilustración. Del empirismo soberano al parlamento de las ideas* (Madrid, 1997)

Rose, William, 'Review of Alexander's *History of Women*', *The Monthly Review (or Literary Journal)*, December, (1779), pp. 413-422

Rousseau, G. S. and Porter, Roy (eds.), *Exoticism in the Enlightenment* (Manchester & New York, 1990)

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, (1762) *Émile* (London, 2000)

Said, Edward W., *Orientalismo* (Madrid, 1990)

Schiebinger, Londa, *The Mind Has No Sex? Women in the Origins of Modern Science* (Cambridge, Mass., 1989)

Schiebinger, Londa, 'Why Mammals Are Called Mammals. Gender Politics in Eighteenth Century Natural History', *American Historical Review*, 98, (1993), pp. 382-411

Schofield, Roger, 'Did the Mothers Really Die? Three Centuries of Maternal Mortality in "The World We Have Lost"', in Lloyd Bonfield, Richard M. Smith and Keith Wrightson (eds.), *The World We Have Gained. Histories of Population and Social Structure* (Oxford & New York, 1986), pp. 231-260

Scott, Joan W., 'Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis', in Joan W. Scott (ed.), *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York, 1999)

Scott, Joan W., *Only Paradoxes to Offer. French Feminists and the Rights of Man* (Cambridge, Mass., 1996)

Sher, Richard L., *Church and University in the Scottish Enlightenment* (Edinburgh, 1985)

Skinner, Andrew S., 'Natural History in the Age of Adam Smith', *Political Studies*, 15, (1967)

Smith, Bonnie G., *The Gender of History* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998)

Smith, Bonnie, *Changing Lives. Women in European History since 1700* (Lexington, Mass. & Toronto, 1989)

Smith, Janet Adam, 'Some Eighteenth Century Ideas of Scotland', in N. T. Phillipson and Rosalind Mitchison (eds.), *Scotland in the Age of Improvement* (Edinburgh, 1970), pp. 107-124

Smith, Norah, 'Sexual Mores and Attitudes in Enlightened Scotland', in Paul-Gabriel Boucé (ed.), *Sexuality in Eighteenth Century Britain* (Totowa, New Jersey, 1982), pp. 47-73

Stewart-Robertson, J. C., 'The Well-Principled Savage or the Child of the Scottish Enlightenment', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 42, (1981)

Stocking, George Jr., 'Scotland as a Model for Mankind: Lord Kames' Philosophical View of Civilization', in Timothy H. H. Thorensen (ed.), *Toward a Science of Man: Essays in the History of Anthropology* (The Hague, 1975), pp. 65-89

Stoler, Ann Laura, 'Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Gender, Race and Morality in Colonial Asia', in Michaela di Leonardo (ed.), *Gender at the Crossroads of Knowledge: Feminist Anthropology in the Postmodern Era* (Berkeley, 1991)

Stone, Lawrence, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500-1800* (London, 1977)

Stuart, Gilbert, (1778 ed.) *A View of Society in Europe, in its Progress from Rudeness to Refinement* (Bristol, 1995)

Sutherland, Kathryn, 'Writings on Education and Conduct. Arguments for Female Improvement', in Vivien Jones (ed.), *Women and Literature in Britain* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 25-45

Thale, Mary, 'Women in London Debating Societies', *Gender and History*, 7, (1995), pp. 5-24

Thomas, Keith, 'The Double Standard', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, XX, (1959), pp. 195-216

Thomas, Nicholas, Guest, Harriet and Dettelbach, Michael (eds.), *Observations made during a Voyage round the World* (Honolulu, 1996)

Thompson, E. P., *Costumbres en común* (Barcelona, 1995)

Todd, Janet, 'Introduction', in Janet Todd (ed.), *Female Education in the Age of Enlightenment* (London, 1996)

Tomaselli, Sylvana, 'Reflections on the History of the Science of Woman', *History of Science*, 29, (1991), pp. 185-205

Tomaselli, Sylvana, 'The Enlightenment Debate on Women', *History Workshop Journal*, 20, (1985), pp. 101-124

Trumbach, Randolph, 'Sex, Gender and Sexual Identity in Modern Culture: Male Sodomy and Feminine Prostitution in Enlightenment London', in John C. Fout (ed.), *Forbidden History. The State, Society and the Regulation of Sexuality in Modern Europe* (Chicago & London, 1992), pp. 89-106

Trumbach, Randolph, *The Rise of the Egalitarian Family* (New York, 1978)

Van Sant, Annie, *Eighteenth Century Sensibility and the Novel. The Senses in Social Context* (Cambridge, 1993)

Vickery, Amanda, 'Historiographical Review. Golden Age to Separate Spheres? A Review of the Categories and Chronology of English Women's History', *Historical Journal*, 36, (1993), pp. 383-414

Vickery, Amanda, *The Gentleman's Daughter. Women's Lives in Georgian England* (New Haven & London, 1998)

Vila, Anne C., *Enlightenment and Pathology. Sensibility in the Literature and Medicine of Eighteenth Century France* (Baltimore, 1998)

Wahrman, Dror, '*Percy*'s Prologue: From Gender Play to Gender Panic in Eighteenth-Century England', *Past and Present*, 159, (1998), pp. 113-160

Watts, Ruth, *Gender, Power and the Unitarians in England, 1760-1860* (London, 1998)

Wilson, A, 'The Ceremony of Childbirth and its Interpretation', in Valerie Fildes (ed.), *Women as Mothers in Pre-Industrial England* (London & New York, 1990), pp. 68-107

Wilson, Kathleen, 'Empire of Virtue. The Imperial Project and Hanoverian Culture', in Lawrence Stone (ed.), *An Imperial State at War. Britain from 1689 to 1815* (London & New York, 1994), pp. 128-164

Wilson, Kathleen, *The Sense of the People. Politics, Culture and Imperialism in England, 1715-1785* (New York, 1995)

Wollstonecraft, Mary, (1792) *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (Oxford, 1999)

Wollstonecraft, Mary, *Mary and The Wrongs of Woman* (Oxford & New York, 1998)

Wood, Paul, 'The Natural History of Man in the Scottish Enlightenment', *History of Science*, 27, (1989), pp. 89-123

Wood, Paul, 'The Science of Man', in N. Jardine, J. A. Secord and E. C. Spary (eds.), *Cultures of Natural History* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 197-210