‘To put women upon thinking’:
Prescriptive Literature, Education, and Women in Early Modern England

A thesis submitted by
Alexandra M. Harter

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

History and Museum Studies

Tufts University

May 2021

© 2021, Alexandra M. Harter

Advisor: Alisha Rankin
Abstract: This paper examines the genre of prescriptive literature in early modern England and how it both reflected and shaped women’s societal roles. Women’s status and morality, the purpose and content of their education, and their role in church hierarchy were all defined within the didactic of genre of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. While the historiography has examined these topics, the prescriptive genre has not been thoroughly appreciated for the role it played in shaping education, especially education for women. This study argues that throughout the seventeenth century, prescriptive literature debated women’s moral status and value, which provided both the justification for and content of women’s education. Finally, women writers in the period employed their education in order to not only argue for women’s education more generally, but also as a means by which to write on those subjects that had traditionally been forbidden, such as theology.
Acknowledgements: I would like very much to thank Professor Alisha Rankin, my advisor for this thesis, who provided such helpful feedback and guidance for my writing and encouraged me so much. Completing this thesis totally online and in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic was not how I expected to finish this MA program, and I really appreciate Professor Rankin’s steady guidance in such uncertain times. I would also like to thank my readers, Professor Ina Baghdiantz-McCabe and Professor Marie-Claire Beaulieu, for their assistance in helping this thesis to the best it could be. Thanks to my family for always supporting me in my studies and to Maren Miller for always being the very definition of a good friend. And finally, I would like to thank my fiancé, Peter Wassily, for always encouraging me and listening to my rambling about this thesis. I can’t imagine completing this work without the support of all of you. Thank you!
Table of Contents

Introduction
   The Early Modern English Prescriptive Genre 1

Chapter One
   Morality in Women’s Education: Purpose and Justification 16

Chapter Two
   The Mother’s Legacy and Early Education 38

Chapter Three
   “To Put Women Upon Thinking”: Religious Prescriptive Writing 65

Conclusion
   The Eighteenth Century Perspective: Mary Wollstonecraft and Thoughts on the Education of Daughters (1787) 88

Bibliography 97
"The right Education of the Female Sex, as it is in a manner everywhere neglected, so it ought to be generally lamented. Most in this depraved later Age think a Woman learned and wise enough if she can distinguish her Husbands Bed from anothers... Vain man is apt to think we were meerly intended for the Worlds propagation, and to keep its inhabitants sweet and clean; but, by their leaves, had we the same Literature, he would find our brains as fruitful as our bodies. ... I cannot but complain of, and must condemn the great negligence of Parents, in letting the fertile ground of their Daughters lie fallow, yet send the barren Noddles of their Sons to the University"1

This quote, from the introduction of Hannah Woolley’s The Gentlewomans Companion (1675), quite directly argues against contemporary notions of the purpose and abilities of women. In early modern England, women were denied entry into universities or positions in the public sphere; they were deemed inferior to men, and were relegated to the domestic sphere, where the only education necessary was of housewifery skills. Nevertheless, some women, such as Hannah Woolley, were quite apt at pushing the boundaries of what was socially acceptable; for while she wrote on subjects that were fitting for women, she did so in a public manner. And as demonstrated with this quote, she pushed back against the idea of women’s inferiority, arguing that they were just as capable as men when it came to intellectual ability.

Woolley’s guide is a practical one, part of a larger genre of prescriptive works that were published on a wide scale in early modern England. The aim of this study is to examine the ideas and theories behind these didactic works and how they reflect early modern English notions of gender roles. Domestic guides such as those by Woolley only scratch the surface of this broad genre, which consisted of guides for education, for spirituality, how to care for one’s estate, how to find and what to look for in a spouse, how to raise one’s children, and, more generally and

often overlapping with these other subjects, how to be an ideal man or woman. Prescriptive literature of the early modern period was written by both men and women, usually of the upper classes. The audience being addressed was often organized by gender as well, with women writers tending to address members of their own sex, which oftentimes allowed them to write with more authority in their instruction. For instance, Hannah Woolley was a middle-class woman writing a comprehensive guide for all women, while Sir Walter Raleigh wrote a piece directed specifically to the male heir of his estate, although the guide could also be of use to male inheritors in general.\(^2\) Mother’s legacies, written just before the death of the author, addressed her children and provided them with instructions on how to live a good Christian life, usually taking the form of a religious guide. These are just a few examples from this broad and diverse genre.

This thesis will reveal how the prescriptive genre of literature in seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century England both reflected and shaped ideas surrounding gender in early modern society. I focus on women’s education in particular, examining how the didactic genre served as an arena for debates about women’s morality, their intellectual abilities, and the purpose of their education. Women writers of the seventeenth century employed various strategies in order to legitimize their writing, such as drawing on their authority as mothers or writing on acceptable topics for women, such as religion. Over time, women writers began to write didactic works that more directly commented on women’s status and education, oftentimes engaging with and refuting previously published misogynistic texts in the process. These arguments for women’s education further developed in later works, which saw women writers drawing on their unusually thorough educations in order to grapple with and provide their own instruction on theological

---

\(^2\) Sir Walter Raleigh (1552-1618), *Sir Walter Raleighs Instructions to His Sonne : and to Posteritie* (London: Printed for Benjamin Fisher, 1632).
topics. Taken together, I argue that these works demonstrate a progression towards more authoritative writing amongst women authors in the prescriptive genre.

**Literature**

Previous studies focused on women in early modern England are numerous, many of which also consider the prescriptive genre. The 1980s and 1990s were a time of particular focus on early modern women, as feminist historians placed women’s writing back into this field of study. Betty Schellenberg details how these studies influenced the field with the interpretive framework of separate spheres for early modern men and women, which relegated women to the private domestic sphere; therefore, any published work by women was by definition a transgressive act. The early 2000s saw a reevaluation of early modern women’s writing. Studies in women’s history took a closer look at the early modern works that had been re-discovered in the ‘80s and ‘90s, as historians pushed back at and further complicated the idea of the victimization of women writers. Recent studies have seen a continuation of this approach, and a closer focus on particular aspects of women’s writing, such as James Daybell’s extensive examination of early modern women’s letter-writing, Julie Crawford’s study on the political aspects of women’s writing, and studies focused on women’s collaborative writing. Carol Pal’s *Republic of Women*, which is focused on Anna Maria van Schurman and the epistolary network

---

surrounding her, argues that women scholars were full participants of the international intellectual world and occupied central positions in scholarly, religious, and political networks.\(^7\)

A previous study that considers girls’ education in more detail is Margaret J. M. Ezell’s *The Patriarch’s Wife*. Ezell’s study is helpful for how she reevaluates the field of women’s history and the previously established views on patriarchy in this period, finding a lack of consensus on this topic. Ezell’s work likewise emphasizes the importance of Biblical perspectives, and defines patriarchalism as “the powers of the Old Testament father over his family… The wife’s role in this form of family structure is envisioned as that of the loyal, and preferably silent, supporter. Her well-being and scope for independent activity depended on her husband’s temper.” In terms of education, Ezell shows how gender shaped what one learned and that women were taught not to challenge male authority.\(^8\)

These studies demonstrate the general consensus that has been reached amongst scholars focused on the early modern era, that education in this period was shaped by popular notions that women were deemed morally and intellectually inferior to men. Ezell takes it further, arguing that this view contributed to a “vicious circle,” which meant that women were criticized for the behavior that their education had instilled in them. Nevertheless, and perhaps most relevant for this study, Ezell argues that the education of a young daughter was a joint parental concern — not so much a particularly patriarchal one — as parents strived to educate their daughters Ezell — and scholars after her — were contesting the previously-held notion amongst historians that there was a lack of intellectual women in this period and that women were simply relegated wholly to the home and kept from being educated. Rather, she provides examples of women with

---


extensive libraries and women being praised for their learnedness. This work is helpful for how it both agrees with and further enriches the perceptions of women’s education in this period. However, there is no extensive comparison between the education of men and women as it is defined in the ideals described in the genre of prescriptive literature.

While Helen M. Jewell’s *Education in Early Modern England* is helpful as a general history of education in this time period, it does not specifically consider the role of prescriptive literature in early modern education. Jewell provides a detailed history of early modern education and considers the differences in purpose between the educations for boys and girls, the educational facilities that were established in this period, largely shaped by the church, as well as occupation and social status. Over time, she argues, education became a form of leisure, allowing women in the upper classes to be educated. However, Jewell emphasizes that the purpose behind humanist education for women was not for the sake of their own development, but rather to make them educated wives to be suitable companions for their husbands and teachers for their children. Lisa Jardine’s work is also focused on education, examining the purpose behind women receiving a humanist education. Focusing her study on the fifteenth century, Jardine argues that women were not able to go into the public sphere to serve the State with her humanist education, which was seen as the ultimate purpose of receiving this instruction; thus, the learned woman was marginalized. In both of these studies, we see how women were relegated to subordinate roles within the home and how education was tailored to this purpose.

Studies that are more specifically focused on the early modern prescriptive genre, such as Jessica Murphy’s *Virtuous Necessity*, consider how this body of contemporary literature defined

---

acceptable and ideal behaviors for women. Virtue was the primary focus for women’s education, as its function was thought to extend outside of the home and into the general society, through the means of how the virtuous mother educated her children.\textsuperscript{12} Other works focused on prescriptive literature demonstrate how women’s education was seen as unnecessary and a distraction from her household duties and her duty to care for her family.\textsuperscript{13} Hilda Smith argues that because women’s education was seen this way, humanism did not change women’s lives as much as it did for men and boys.\textsuperscript{14} However, by primarily considering male-authored texts, Smith’s conclusion is negatively skewed, with the outcome that early modern women become victims. This view also fails to consider the body of work by women writers and other men who pushed back against these ideas and argued in favor of women’s education.\textsuperscript{15}

Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford’s \textit{Women in Early Modern England, 1550-1720} is a comprehensive social history that examines almost every aspect of early modern Englishwomen’s lives, providing background and context. The authors’ purpose is to “comprehend ‘women’s experiences’ not as a simple linear description of female behavior, but as an intricate process of interactions.” The authors consider the pervasive contemporary views on women and briefly examine how these beliefs shaped how young girls were educated. Moral virtue was of primary concern, and oftentimes girls were taught about modesty and preserving chastity from as young as three years of age. Mothers taught their daughters at home, with

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{13} Hilda L. Smith, “Humanist Education and the Renaissance Concept of Woman,” in \textit{Women and Literature in Britain, 1500-1700}, Helen Wilcox, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 11-12.
\item \textsuperscript{14} Smith, “Humanist Education,” 26.
\item \textsuperscript{15} Indeed, authors such as Betty Schellenberg have demonstrated how some feminist historians of the 1980s and 1990s ironically came to conclusions that early modern women were oppressed, through their use of a feminist historical framework and focusing too exclusively on gender. Instead, more recent studies are focusing more on the nuances of contemporary arguments, as well as other factors that were at play in women’s decision to write, such as class or status. Schellenberg, \textit{The Professionalization of Women Writers}; Patricia Pender, ed., \textit{Gender, Authorship, and Early Modern Women’s Collaboration} (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); Pal, \textit{Republic of Women}.
\end{itemize}
instruction for literacy often very closely tied to religious education, through the use of the Bible as a practice tool. It was the responsibility of the mother to prepare her daughter to be a mother and a wife herself one day, and to be the mistress of her own home; as such, housewifery skills were also a primary focus in her education. Mendelson and Crawford emphasize that a girl’s education was very different from a boy’s.  

My own study will contribute to the field by examining more broadly the genre of prescriptive literature, the question of women’s morality and education in early modern England, and the manner in which contemporary authors fashioned their arguments as they navigated early modern social mores. I explore more closely what an early modern girl’s education consisted of and how writers of the prescriptive genre reflected and shaped these trends in early modern English education.

**Women’s Educational Status**

Of particular relevance to the early modern prescriptive genre is the *querelle des femmes*, the literary debate concerning women that began in the late Middle Ages and continued throughout the Renaissance. Scholars often point to Christine de Pisan’s (1363-1434) *City of Ladies* (1405) as the beginning of the *querelle* because her work challenged the widespread belief of women’s moral and intellectual inferiority. Indeed, from de Pisan on, women began to respond to specific, published attacks on their sex, and women’s writings concerning their

---

18 Monique Frize, *Laura Bassi and Science in 18th Century Europe: The Extraordinary Life and Role of Italy’s Pioneering Female Professor* (Berlin: Springer Berlin Heidelberg, 2013), 10.
education had to first argue against “cultural and social constraints on women.” Both defenses of women and misogynistic attacks tended to follow particular patterns: for instance, the order and method of the creation of Adam and Eve, the Fall and each of their roles in it, physical differences between men and women, gender roles in procreation, moral virtues of each of the sexes, and their intellectual capabilities.

Within the English context, various works have been identified as part of this debate, such as *The Defence of Good Women* (1540) by the early modern English humanist Thomas Elyot (1490-1546). Elyot’s work also drew on Henricus Cornelius Agrippa’s *Declamation on the Nobility and Preeminence of the Female Sex*, a work that was influential even before it was translated into English in the mid-sixteenth century — Elyot himself used the Latin edition of Agrippa’s treatise. On the misogynists’ side, the idea of women’s inferiority was naturalized, and the institutions that relegated women to the their chaste, silent roles were deemed divinely ordained as women were seen as inherently weaker and only equipped to care for the household. Over time, the question of women’s learning became a more central focus in this debate, with the example of female rulers giving concrete support to the arguments of women’s defenders.

Highly influential and powerful in this period, religion was one of the most pervasive constructs in English society and shaped the worldviews of many. This included outlooks on gender. After the Reformation, Protestantism emphasized the subordinate role of women, using

---

Eve as the basis for their arguments in two ways: first, the fact of her secondary creation to Adam was used to argue that woman was made to be man’s helper, and second, that Eve’s perceived moral and intellectual weakness was the cause of the Fall meant that women deserved to feel pain in childbirth and belonged under man’s authority. While Protestantism in early modern England held that souls were equal regardless of gender, this equality was not to be enjoyed on earth; rather, women had to wait to be in Heaven to enjoy equal status with men.  

The Reformation and humanist movements also influenced the question of women’s status, combining to form a “Christian humanism” that melded together the methodology of humanist scholarship with Christian inquiry; for girls, this meant that they were seen as capable of learning, albeit less so than boys, and their education should be for the purpose of learning to be a good wife and mother. The individual’s spiritual life became the focus, and women, too, were expected to study the Bible on their own — thereby providing a reason for women to at least learn to read. Some women were able to rely on this expectation for private devotional study by crafting translations of religious and other texts, a “submissive authorial position” that Jaime Goodrich examines in Faithful Translators. Thomas More (1478-1535) is often given as the quintessential example of a humanist scholar who supported women’s education, living out this opinion by educating his daughters. However, some scholars have argued that More and his fellow humanists did not advocate for women’s education because they believed them as capable as boys, but rather, because daughters were thought to be more corrupt and in need of the correcting agent an education provides.

---

27 Heller, Mother’s Legacy, 18.
Another contemporary humanist, Juan Luis Vives (1493-1540), wrote a particularly popular and influential text, *De institutione feminae Christianae (The Education of a Christian Woman)* in 1523. The work was translated into English by Richard Hyrde around 1530 and went through nine editions. Vives’s treatise was exceedingly popular, and many later authors reiterated his points in their own writing, such as Richard Braithwaite’s *The English Gentlewoman* (1641) and Heinrich Bullinger’s *The Christen State of Matrimonye* (1541).  

Historian Hilda Smith, in her article, “Humanist Education and the Renaissance Concept of Women,” stated that one “cannot overemphasize the importance of Juan Luis Vives in laying the groundwork for humanism’s limited vision of women’s potential. His work, more than any other, established the parameters of women’s learning in the first half of the sixteenth century.”

While Vives was writing for the sake of women’s education, he was focused on their moral education, and reiterated again and again the importance of chastity. For Vives, the purpose of a woman’s education was to equip her to be a good companion to her husband. This is following a Biblical model of the woman’s role in her marriage, which was to be a helper to her husband, a role assigned by God at the time of the creation of Eve. Vives argues that while it is necessary — and difficult — to provide extensive prescriptions of conduct for the man because he has responsibilities both within the home as well as outside it, the woman’s sole focus was on her chastity, her “only care,” and once she had a firm grasp of this concept, “she may be considered to have received sufficient instruction.” The early modern woman’s education, as prescribed by Vives, was a moral one. Due to this foundation in religion, Vives was

---


31 Genesis 2:18.
then able to argue that his text was comprehensive and aimed towards all women, not just Queen Catherine, to whom he dedicated this work as an educational tool for the Princess Mary. 

It is important to note that while he was the first to write a treatise solely focused on the topic of women’s education, Vives was not alone in his views. For instance, Elyot’s *The Defence of Good Women* (1540), a prominent piece within the English *querelle des femmes*, argued for women’s education. Elyot even went so far as to suggest that women could actively and successfully participate in civil policy. Nevertheless, in his dedicatory note, we get a sense of his purpose in writing. After considering the story of Queen Zenobia, whom he describes as a lady famous for her “excellente vertues,” Elyot states that he was desirous to make it possible for women to read the story of the queen so that they might be provoked to embrace “vertue more gladly,” and to bring up their children well. Although Elyot, like Vives, focused on virtue, *The Defence of Good Women* is significant for the manner in which he structures his defense of women. For instance, Elyot’s focus on Queen Zenobia, especially, demonstrates his humanist approach that a woman can “attain a full measure of humanity,” as Constance Jordan put it. Thus, the topic of women’s morality and women’s education was of particular focus in the English *querelle des femmes*.

Literacy in early modern England did not have the same meaning that it does to us today. Reading and writing were separate skills, and the ideal of the silent woman was reflected in how girls were educated. Women were often “silenced” by only teaching them to read and neglecting

---

34 Sir Thomas Elyot (1490-1546), *The Defence of Good Women* (London: In ædibus Thomæ Bertheleti typis impress, 1540), dedicatory note.
the teaching of writing skills. While many scholars have attempted to calculate literacy rates in this period, historians such as Wendy Wall and James Daybell have recently complicated the matter further, demonstrating that the different meanings of literacy in the early modern era have called into question the previously held notion that we can quantify rates of literacy. For instance, someone may have been able to read but not to write; a woman could demure and refuse to sign her name or write in public as a form of modesty; writings were often published anonymously; scribes were hired as a symbol of status or even just for their neater handwriting; and some individuals were capable of reading and writing in certain fonts but not others. Yet at the same time, reading was clearly seen as necessary for one’s spiritual piety in Protestant England, and the ability to write was often necessary for the running of one’s household, a major part of a wife’s duty to be a suitable helper for her husband. Furthermore, Daybell has shown that letter-writing was not exclusive to the elite male class, and that letters are in fact the most numerous body of sources for women’s writing during the sixteenth century. Finally, while literacy rates cannot be known as completely as we might like and we do know that girls were taught to write less frequently than boys were, this period did nevertheless see an increase in female literacy, especially after the Protestant Reformation.

The education of a young girl usually happened within the home and under the supervision and often tutelage of her mother, a governess, or tutors. Following the model that Vives defined in his treatise, girls were taught how to behave in a restrained (silent) manner, and how to protect their chastity. Literacy skills were inextricably intertwined with religious

---

38 For example, see Alice Le Strange’s extensive record-keeping for her husband’s estate and her household, as examined in Jane Whittle and Elizabeth Griffiths, *Consumption and Gender in the Early Seventeenth-Century Household: The World of Alice Le Strange* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).
education, as mothers taught piety and reading simultaneously by studying the Bible or other religious texts once they had learned their letters. Most of all, girls were educated in order to learn how to be a good wife and mother, and in the upper classes, girls were taught virtues of modesty and obedience so that she would be submissive to her husband.\textsuperscript{41} This set in motion what Margaret Ezell called the “vicious circle,” that reinforced the idea that women were intellectually and morally weaker than men through their poor education.\textsuperscript{42} However, as will be seen later in this study, there were early modern Englishwomen who were extremely well-educated, receiving an education that was traditionally exclusive to men. A more formal education, usually exclusive to boys, consisted of a humanist model of instruction that aimed to prepare men for service to the state, through linguistic skills, virtue, and eloquence. Most importantly, early modern education was tied to what was appropriate for the student to learn, depending on their social status and gender in order to better equip students to serve society, as well as maintain and enforce the social order. Thus, girls did not often learn subjects such as Latin, Greek, Hebrew, mathematics, and philosophy; instead, they learned basic reading, religion, possibly writing, needlework, and household management.\textsuperscript{43}

\textbf{Chapter Outline}

The following chapters are organized thematically, broadly tracing the progression of prescriptive works and the manner in which seventeenth century women writers argued for women’s status, morality, and eventually, their more general education. Chapter One examines the central role of morality within the genre of prescriptive literature on women’s education,

\begin{flushright}41\ Mendelson and Crawford, \textit{Women in Early Modern England}, 89-91.\end{flushright} 
\begin{flushright}42\ Margaret J. M. Ezell, \textit{The Patriarch’s Wife}, 10.\end{flushright} 
\begin{flushright}43\ Danielle Clarke, \textit{The Politics of Early Modern Women’s Writing} (Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2001), 20-23.\end{flushright}
focusing particularly on how the figure of Eve was used on both sides of the debate on women’s morality and status. The focus on women’s morality was the driving force in women’s education and women authors drew on this societal expectation to justify their writing and their work as educators. While misogynistic texts argued for women’s inferiority and natural tendency towards wickedness, the long tradition of women — and men — pushing back against this view was taken even further in the seventeenth century, as women actively refuted and debated against these views in published works, and even opened schools for girls. Women’s epistolary networks also present evidence for how women privately encouraged and collaborated with each other. Furthermore, and more importantly for the focus of this chapter, these instances of correspondence between learned early modern women serve to provide further insight into the focus on women’s morality in order to justify their public writing on such matters, as well as their conceptualization of the purpose of women’s education.

In Chapter Two, I will examine a subgenre of prescriptive literature, mother’s legacy writing, and how it further demonstrates the role of women in education as instructors, in this case, the role of the mother in early education. Continuing from the first chapter, the importance of morality, inextricably intertwined as it was with religion, served as a justification by these authors in both their decision to write as well as their authority over their children. A comparison between legacy writing written by fathers and mothers will yield a deeper understanding of the differences — and similarities — in the focus and content of each parent’s role in their children’s education. Fathers tended to focus more exclusively on the education of their sons, with a particular concern for the management and continuation of the family estate; while some fathers did provide religious instruction for their children, mothers were much more exclusively focused on Scripture and religious instruction. By rooting their moral instruction in Scripture — and
insinuating that their authoritative instruction came from God, not just themselves — mothers were able to instruct daughters, sons, and even husbands in what their children should learn. The strategic use of Scripture further demonstrates how early modern Englishwomen’s authority over their children’s education, their role as educator, and the content of that education was firmly rooted in the expectation of women’s morality.

Finally, Chapter Three of this study examines women’s public religious writing, and how it fits within the period’s tradition of prescriptive literature. However, the works that are the focus of this chapter, such as Margaret Fell’s *Women’s Speaking Justified* (1666), and Mary Astell’s *The Christian Religion* (1705), are the most authoritative stances that we have seen women take in the study thus far. While the previously examined treatises will have been shown to express a clear a clear argument in regard to the status of women and the necessity of their education, the treatises examined in this final chapter are strikingly different for how they provide religious instruction more directly. Fell, especially, as a member of the Society of Friends was a formative leader of the movement and played no small part in shaping the theological beliefs of the religious group. This work, as well as Astell’s philosophical text that argues for the infallibility of Christianity and the Anglican church, are two examples of women in the late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century providing their authoritative — and clearly highly educated — commentary on religion for the general reader.

Finally, it is important to note that while all of these works do express important ideas surrounding women and their education, they are nevertheless *ideas*. While this rhetoric certainly both reflected and shaped perspectives around these topics, it is not necessarily exactly what was done in practice. Nevertheless, this rhetoric is no less important for how it demonstrates circulating ideas, for it established the practice of education in the early modern era.
Chapter One
Morality in Women’s Education: Purpose and Justification

“A learned woman is thought to be a comet that bodes mischief whenever it appears.”¹

This quote from Bathsua Makin’s *The Ancient Education of Gentlewomen* (1673), exemplifies early modern English anxieties surrounding women’s education. Many contemporary treatises were focused on this subject as part of the ongoing debate within the *querelle des femmes*, mentioned in the Introduction. Early modern England was extremely hierarchical in structure, and women were often unable to express their own views directly.² Most of the authors considered in this chapter published their work anonymously, in order to avoid being perceived as inappropriately outspoken. Other women were involved in the literary sphere by different means, such as translation, which generally appealed to women due to the limitations they often faced.³ However, Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford have found that “female culture” was one of the primary methods through which women could exercise their own agency, in their own lives as well as a means by which they could influence society in general.⁴ Women’s literary networks served as one of these nodes of female culture, and women employed this aspect of their lives as a means by which to uphold society’s expectations, as well as to subversively push back against the lesser roles that had been assigned to women and their inferior status.

Religion in this period comprehensively shaped and defined women’s lives, and indeed, early modern English society in general. Sermons, for instance, settled popular debates “about everything from marital relations to revolutionary politics.” And while Protestantism held that women were spiritually equal to men, the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers did not allow women to participate equally within more earthly hierarchies – or even hierarchies within the Church. Passages from the Bible were also used in order to bar women from holding any position of authority and to argue for their more subordinate roles, such as being their husband’s helper, as Eve was created to be Adam’s (Genesis 2:18-23, 3:16; I Corinthians 11:7-10, I Timothy 2:14, I Peter 3:1-7). Women themselves, as we shall see below, also upheld these ideas, perceived to be based on Scripture and therefore not up for debate.\(^5\) However, this chapter demonstrates that some women pushed back against these notions and at the very least argued for their spiritual equality with men in their writing.

Both literacy and education more broadly were shaped by one’s gender – for instance, girls were often taught to read (so that she could read the Bible and passively learn) but not to write (so that she would be “silent” and not active).\(^6\) Humanism shaped education and its purpose in this period, focusing on producing “men trained in virtue and eloquence who could use their linguistic skills in the service of the state.”\(^7\) For women, it was not customary to receive a robust humanistic education and demonstrating a proficiency in advanced studies in a public manner was perceived as indecorous. Due to this perception, the educated woman was therefore consigned to marginality and her humanist education “relegated her to the cloister,” as Lisa Jardine put it. In this way, it was almost immoral to provide her with a more robust education,

\(^6\) Ibid., 90.
which was so tied to service to the state in the public sphere. Generally, humanists tended to at least admit that women were intellectually capable of learning, but education was so tied to purpose in this period, that they did not much see the point of providing women with an education that was meant to prepare one for a career out in the public. However, James Daybell has shown the complicated nature of investigating women’s literacy skills – especially the ability to write – and also demonstrates that the “ability to write a letter was viewed more and more as a ‘functional’ skill, useful to women acting as mothers, wives, and mistresses of the household, corresponding on behalf of family interests.”

Writing such as translation work was seen as another appropriate outlet for women in addition to Scripture, although works being translated were often religious in nature. Especially relevant to this study, women who took on this work often used the Bible and demonstrated their knowledge of Scripture to justify their theological beliefs. In this chapter, I will examine women writers’ use of Scripture to refute negative claims on women’s status and morality. These literary exchanges often used the same passages of the Bible as prescriptive texts, in order to refute them. I demonstrate that these prescriptive treatises used the rhetoric of morality on both sides of the debate about women. For texts which held that women were inferior to men, this focus was on how these authors believed that women tended to behave wickedly. Treatises that pushed back against these notions drew on this idea of morality as a justification for furthering women’s education. While many works by women authors did adhere at least in some sense to traditional ideas of women’s inferiority, we do also see them struggling to reconcile this view

11 Goodrich, Faithful Translators, 187, 189.
with their impassioned responses that women were nevertheless worthy of an education, even if that education primarily consisted of a virtuous one.

Studies such as Margaret Ferguson’s *Dido’s Daughters* and Elaine Beilin’s *Redeeming Eve* are particularly helpful for how they examine early modern women’s writing within a broader framework that considers the period’s context that influenced these works. Scholars have examined the figure of Eve in the early modern period, and Beilin’s work is especially relevant for how it considers the social and literary attitudes that shaped women’s writing, the particular difficulties that women in this period faced when they ventured to write, and the strategies they employed to legitimize their writing. She points to the Reformation as “the single most important influence on women writers,” and allowed women to adopt “the persona of the preacher or teacher of the faithful.”

Ferguson’s text, meanwhile, describes the standardization of language and how its hierarchical nature shaped speech and writing, usually defining one’s social standing in the process. She examines what she calls “gendered literacies,” and how one’s gender shaped what was deemed appropriate for one to read. Ferguson confirms how early education was influenced by gender, with young girls and lower-class boys ending their education earlier than upper-class boys. The curriculums often prescribed reading and domestic tasks to girls while boys learned to write and do sums, thereby preparing them for their future roles as a wife at home or for a career in the public sphere, respectively. This is in keeping with the general consensus that scholars have reached on how reading and writing were taught separately and how early education was shaped by gender.

---


13 Margaret W. Ferguson, *Dido’s Daughters: Literacy, Gender, and Empire in Early Modern England and France* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 4, 10, 68.

My own study will contribute to this scholarship by examining early modern prescriptive works together, and the ideas that were circulating in the early modern period around women and women’s education. Of particular focus is the manner in which women authors interacted with misogynist ideas about women’s inherent tendencies towards wickedness and weakness, ideas that consequently shaped women’s education. These responses demonstrate the literary debate within the prescriptive genre over the course of the seventeenth century. Women writers of this period strategically employed arguments that both shaped their own ideas but also used traditional tropes, particularly a focus on Eve as an example, in order to serve their own purposes.

This chapter will begin by examining the works of prescriptive literature that focused on the question of women’s morality, as demonstrated by debates in printed texts by authors such as “Jane Anger” and Rebecca Speght. Next, I consider the debate over women’s morality and how it shaped the content of women’s education and also served as a justification for women’s instruction. Finally, a brief section on private epistolary exchanges demonstrates the high level of education that some women reached in early modern society, as well as the concern that women had for their education. While women supported each other in their work and fully participated in what Carol Pal has titled the “Republic of Women,” they also reinforced the ideas of morality spread throughout the printed literature.¹⁵

**Ideas of Women’s Morality**

To begin, it is first necessary to examine the foundational texts in this period that formed the basis for later works and in large part outlines the beliefs about women’s status and morality,

ideas that had been circulating since the medieval era. Treatises such as Juan Luis Vives’s *The Education of a Christian Woman* (1523) and Henricus Cornelius Agrippa’s *Declamation on the Nobility and Preeminence of the Female Sex* (1509) were both part of the *querelle des femmes* that held more positive views on women. These works were unusual, however, because they were outside the norm. Prior to 1640, men wrote the vast majority of the books for women.\textsuperscript{16} Texts such as Vives’s *Education* and Castiglione’s *The Courtier* (printed in English in 1561) focused on virtue and chastity for women. *The Courtier* takes a more positive view on the prominent idea of women’s talkativeness, although Castiglione held that women’s “sweetness of language” is for men’s entertainment and women needed to take care that they did not degenerate their talk to gossip.\textsuperscript{17} Thus, even treatises that were not totally punitive towards women still held some sense of women’s inferiority.

Particularly important, Henricus Cornelius Agrippa’s *Declamation*, while originally written much earlier than the texts that will be examined in this chapter, was influential in such works as Sir Thomas Elyot’s *The Defence of Good Women* (1540), serving as one of the earliest English texts in the *querelle des femmes*. Indeed, Agrippa’s work was translated into English in this period, demonstrating contemporary focus and concern for the question of women’s status.\textsuperscript{18} Agrippa’s view on women was very favorable, and was also focused on the question of women’s inherent morality, arguing that they had more virtue than men, and pointing out that it is earthly laws that “compel women to submit to men, …and that without reason or necessity natural or divine, but under the pressure of custom, education, chance, or some occasion favorable to

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext{16}{Suzanne W. Hull, *Chaste, Silent & Obedient: English Books for Women, 1475-1640* (San Marino: The Huntington Library, 1982), 16.}
\footnotetext{17}{Hull, *Chaste, Silent & Obedient*, 32.}
\end{footnotes}
tyranny.” Thomas Elyot’s *The Defence of Good Women* (1540) also held more favorable views towards women, although his positive arguments were specific to those women whom he considered good, that is, virtuous and chaste; only these women were worthy of participating in civil society. Women writers were inserting their own arguments into this debate, thereby setting a precedent for future authors who continued to push for women’s education.

Nevertheless, these more positive views were outside of the norm for early modern views on women. For example, Joseph Swetnam’s *The Arraignment of Leuud, Idle, Froward, and Vnconstant Women Or the Vanities of them* (1615) is part of a broader literary network of misogynistic texts and prescriptive works such as conduct books that take a negative view concerning women. Other examples can be seen in Vives’s particular focus on marriage and chastity as the all-important virtue for women, as well as a more contemporary text such as William Hill’s *A New Years-gift for Women* (1600), whose purpose in writing he describes as to provide a guide for women so that they might know their duties both to God and to their husbands. Late seventeenth-century authors such as Richard Allestree recognized this tendency to label women as in need of moral instruction due to their natural inferiorities, writing that some had gone too far in this notion, making “every woman so far an Eve, that her depravation shall forfeit her whole kind.” Allestree tried to remedy these misogynistic views in his work, *The Ladies Calling* (1682).

---

21 Luckyj, “‘A Mouzell for Melastomus’ in Context: Rereading the Swetnam-Speght Debate,” 120.
22 William Hill (1619-1667), *A New-Years-Gift for Women. being a True Looking-Glass which they Seldome have in their Own Closet* (London, Printed by T.N. for the author, 1660), title page.
Women’s Responses to Misogynistic Texts

The interconnectedness of published works in this period is crucial to understanding women’s literary role. Prescriptive authors often responded to other works focused on the same topic, and Danielle Clarke has shown that these responses were shaped by the author’s theological, political, and/or familial alliances, not necessarily their sex. A prime example is a work published in 1589 under the pseudonym “Jane Anger,” the first published text by an Englishwoman to defend the status of women. The work was written in response to a previously published anonymous – and misogynistic – text, *Book his Surfeit Love* (1588). While this misogynist text has not survived, Anger makes numerous references to this treatise in her own writing and refutes numerous arguments for women’s inferiority. For instance, women’s tongues were often described as their weapons, or their tools for gossip and unhelpful speech; in other words, it was a part of women that needed to be controlled. However, in Anger’s text, she writes that it is men’s tongues that often are out of control and remarks, “Was there ever any so abused, so slandered, so railed upon, or so wickedly handled undeservedly, as are we women?” Women, according to Anger, are the more virtuous ones, and if they are contrary to men, or often

---

26 For instance, Bathsua Makin recognizes this common belief in her pamphlet, *The Ancient Education of Gentlewomen* (1673) in Frances Teague and Margaret J. M. Ezell, eds., *Educating English Daughters: Late Seventeenth-Century Debates* (Toronto: Iter Academic Press, 2016), 63-64; Another example is Robert Crowley’s (1549) guidebook, quoted in Suzanne Hull’s *Chaste, Silent & Obedient*, which instructs that women should “Avoyde idle and wanton talke” and to Do all her business quietly, Robert Crowley, “The Womans Lesson,” in Hull, *Chaste, Silent & Obedient*, 53-54. Other prescriptive books in the period which advise against women being too talkative and warn against the nagging shrew is Thomas Salter’s *Mirrhor of Modestie* (1579) and John Taylor’s *Divers crabtree lectures* (1639) in Hull, *Chaste, Silent & Obedient*, 83, 207. For more on the figure of the shrew, see Lynda E. Boose’s article, “Scolding Brides and Bridling Scolds: Taming the Woman’s Unruly Member,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 42, no. 2 (1991): 179-213.
in opposition to them, then it is because men themselves are contrary to that which is good.\textsuperscript{28} Virtue was often of primary focus and consideration for women, as seen in such texts as Vives’s \textit{The Education of a Christian Woman}.\textsuperscript{29} Anger used this traditional focus on morality to her advantage by taking the idea a step further and arguing that women were already virtuous, in contrast to men, who were lacking in virtue. Anger even compared men to dogs who harass women.\textsuperscript{30} In her view, women were almost inherently moral, while men were decidedly lacking in this respect.

This comparison becomes even clearer when one considers Anger’s focus on the creation story, and the role of Eve. Traditionally, Eve was often regarded as the defining example for women’s inferiority and weakness, as well as their tendency towards evil, and religion was the basis for morals in early modern society.\textsuperscript{31} In her treatise, Anger does not neglect this subject. She writes that Eve, having been made from a better quality of material than men (from man, who was a living being with a soul, rather than dust, the material from which God made Adam), is therefore more excellent than men; indeed, it was from women that salvation came, a woman who first believed, and a woman who first repented from sin. Anger clearly anticipated that these and other similar remarks in her treatise would be met with opposition, and preemptively addressed what she expected would be their counterargument: that none are good apart from God. She accepts this, and counters that if women are “ill,” that is, bad, then men are even worse – and certainly no better. She supports this point by detailing how dependent on women men are,

\textsuperscript{28} Anger, \textit{Her Protection for Women}, 54.
\textsuperscript{29} Indeed, Vives equated education with chastity: “we would not find any learned woman who was unchaste.” For him, chastity was the equivalent of all virtues and without chastity, a woman was worth nothing. Juan Luis Vives, \textit{The Education of a Christian Woman}, Charles Fantazzi, ed. and trans. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 65, 85-86
\textsuperscript{30} Anger, \textit{Her Protection for Women}, 56.
\textsuperscript{31} Mendelson and Crawford, \textit{Women in Early Modern England}, 32.
such as the help that women provide with housewifery skills. 32 Once again, Anger takes arguments that were traditionally used to relegate women to the domestic sphere and employs them to defend women’s morality. Here we see an example of how early modern writers responded to each other’s works, as well as how the expectation of women’s morality could be used to argue against the idea of women’s inferiority.

The example of Rachel Speght serves to further illustrate these points and is perhaps even more concrete, as she published under her own name. Speght published her 1616 work, A Mouzell for Melastomus, in response to Joseph Swetnam’s Arraignment. While Swetnam’s title suggests that his text was aimed exclusively at women who were deemed sinful or “bad,” it is more fittingly recognized as a misogynistic text that is critical of the whole sex. Speght’s was not the only published response to Swetnam’s misogynistic treatise, and the entire debate has been covered extensively in previous scholarship. 33 However, it is nevertheless worth examining here for the manner in which Swetnam and his responders used morality and Scripture to support their arguments. Speght, especially, formulated her arguments based on verses from the Bible as a means by which to defend women’s virtuous characters.

In a similar manner to William Hill, who held that Eve was worse than Judas, Swetnam’s text is particularly focused on women’s wickedness and general lack of morality. 34 He, too, drew on the example of Eve, writing that as soon as she was created, “straightaway her mind was set vpon mischiefe,” and she quickly caused the fall of man; ever since, women have been a woe.

32 Anger, Her Protection for Women, 56-57.
34 Hill writes, “That ye are all the Daughters of Eve, who was the Author of much more evil to mankind, in seducing her Husband to eat of the forbidden Fruit, then Judas was in betraying our Saviour,” Hill, A New-Years-Gift for Women, A2v.
unto man, and follow Eve’s example. Women, as demonstrated by Eve, are naturally inclined to wickedness. Even worse, they lead others, such as their husbands, into sinful behavior as well. Swetnam was centering his arguments on the lack of women’s morality, and his treatise can be considered a reiteration of these previous misogynistic texts.

The nineteen-year-old, unmarried Speght could evidently not remain silent in the face of Swetnam’s criticisms. Speght was the first early modern Englishwoman to identify herself by name in her critique of these gender ideologies and she was the only of Swetnam’s responders not to use a pseudonym. This was likely due to her religious upbringing. The daughter of a Calvinist minister, Speght was more than likely encouraged by her father, James Speght, to practice private devotions. This would have given her the opportunity to formulate her own opinions in terms of women’s status at the time of Creation, and how this ought to shape their status in her own time. Not only that, she also clearly became extremely familiar with Scripture, as evidenced by how she employed relevant Bible verses in the defense and support of her arguments.

The English Reformation encouraged the individual to read the Bible independently, as part of the concept of the priesthood of all believers, or the spiritual equality of all Christians. This concept, combined with humanism, formed a kind of “Christian humanism,” amongst the educated upper classes. Consequently, educational models arose which combined the methodology of humanist scholarship with “an overtly Christian spirit of intellectual inquiry”; at the same time, education became more widely available, beginning in the sixteenth century, and

35 Joseph Swetnam, *The Arraignment of Leuud, Idle, Froward, and Unconstant Women Or the Vanitie of them, Choose You Whether : With a Commendation of Wise, Vertuous and Honest Women : Pleasant for Married Men, Profitable for Young Men, and Hurtfull to None* London (Printed by George Purslowe for Thomas Archer, and are to be solde at his shop in Popes-head Pallace, neere the Royall Exchange, 1615), 1.
36 Barbara Kiefer Lewalski, as quoted in James Purkis, “Rachel Speght as ‘Critical Reader,’” 108.
continuing into the seventeenth. For Speght and other women, the Reformation allowed for them to exercise greater authority within their households, acting as religious stewards and teachers. Elaine Beilin points to the Reformation as “the single most important influence on women writers,” due to its emphasis on studying Scripture for oneself and individual salvation. Thus it is extremely likely that this is at least partially what encouraged Speght to take up her pen, as part of the Calvinist religious community. Indeed, Speght was particularly close to church leadership, having been raised by her father, a Protestant minister, and later marrying another minister in 1621.

Thus when Swetnam uses the story of Creation to argue for women’s inferiority and “crookedness” – since Eve was created from Adam’s rib, a crooked and in Swetnam’s mind useless part of the body – Speght is likewise equipped to employ Scripture in her refutations of Swetnam’s arguments. With this particular example, she uses the Creation story to point out that man were made from the dust of the earth, while woman was made from man, a living soul; furthermore, she was “not produced from Adams foote, to be his too low inferior; nor from his head to be his superiour, but from his side, neare his heart, to be his equall,” so that they may have equal authority over all creation. Women, Speght argues, were made for the glory of God, and to be a helper to men. The man is still the head of the household in Speght’s understanding, however, the woman makes real contributions in the authority that she has over creation, albeit under the authority of her husband. Nevertheless, because woman was created by God for His glory, she is deserving of respect.

Speght rhetorically admits that she is “young in yeares, and more defectiue in knowledge, that little smattering in Learning which I haue obtained, being only the fruit of such vacant houres, as I could spare from affaires befitting my Sex.” Nevertheless, she felt qualified enough through her knowledge of Scripture to form a thorough reply to Swetnam’s *Arraignment*. Speght’s arguments were moral ones, rooted in the Bible, and concerned with religion, an appropriate subject for women to focus on. Ultimately, Speght was only the first to respond to Swetnam’s *Arraignment*, and later authors similarly focused on morality as a justification and support for their arguments. “Ester Sowernam” and “Constantia Munda” – both pennames – each wrote a response to Swetnam’s treatise, although only Sowernam referred to and attempted to refine Speght’s arguments. This not only further demonstrates these early modern prescriptive literary exchanges and debates, but also women’s use of morality in order to defend women’s status.

In her 1617 didactic work, *Esther Hath Hang’d Haman*, Sowernam tells of how she came to read Swetnam’s and Speght’s texts, and mentions that while Speght – whom she calls “the Maid” – “doth many times excuse her tendernesse of years, I found it to be true in the slendernesse of her answer, for she undertaking to defend women, doth rather charge and condemn women.” In Sowernam’s mind, Speght was the young and inexperienced girl who did not effectively refute Swetnam’s claims; as the older, and more experienced adult woman, Sowernam was more equipped to argue against Swetnam’s text.

---

43 Speght, *A Mouzell for Melastomus*, “Certaine Qvaeres to the bayer of Women.”
Sowernam also responded to Swetnam’s point about women’s “crookendness” because of God’s creation of woman from man’s rib. She first begins by attacking Swetnam’s character by using Swetnam’s own logic: that because Adam was made of clay and dust, then Swetnam himself must be of a “durty and muddy disposition.” The exchange of insults aside, Sowernam continues by referencing Genesis 2:7. While this verse specifically referred to Adam being given the breath of life from God, Sowernam instead quotes the verse as follows: “God did breath in them the spirit of life.” 46 In Sowernam’s understanding of the verse, God breathed life into Adam and Eve both. An earlier verse, Genesis 1:27, reads, “So God created mankind… male and female He created them.” 47 This verse can perhaps to some extent explain Sowernam’s interpretation of a more simultaneous creation of man and woman, especially when one considers that people in this period often had their own “working Bible” contained in their memory – while not perfect, it was clearly quoted after the author had spent significant and extensive individual time dedicated to studying and memorizing passages of the Bible. Danielle Clarke, for instance, argues for the very active work of memorization of the Bible, which served as a means by which to “stor[e] up precepts and ideas for future use, either for spiritual development, advancement, or comfort.” 48 It is entirely possible, then, that Sowernam was employing her own store of memorized Biblical passages in order to argue for women’s morality.

In any case, Sowernam used this verse to argue that if Eve was crooked from Adam’s rib, then how much more would man exceed in crookedness, since this crooked part originated with him, and he had a greater number of them. While not exactly an argument based on women’s

---

47 Gen. 1:27.
morality, but more of a disparaging of the male sex, Sowernam nevertheless was arguing for women’s moral nature. She continues, referencing Speght in the process, when she writes that because Eve was created in Paradise, she – and women in general – are unable to degenerate from her natural inclinations to be good, since she is a “Paradician.” This argument is made after directly referencing Speght’s *A Mouzell for Melastomus*, when Speght argued that because woman was created from man’s rib, close to his heart, she should be considered his (spiritual) equal. Thus, Swetnam, Speght, and Sowernam were all drawing on Scripture in some way to support their arguments. However, while Swetnam used Scripture “to dishonor and abuse all women,” as Sowernam describes, Speght and Sowernam were both using Scripture to argue for women’s more equal status.49

All of these works taken together demonstrate this focus on the figure of Eve as a means by which to argue for or against women’s moral character. Regardless of the author’s position, the Bible was employed as the means by which to educate women, whether it be a tool through which to remedy her inherent faults or simply a fitting educational tool to instill in her a virtuous character, an appropriate curriculum for men and women. Within this particularly literary debate, it was Swetnam’s work that was ultimately more popular amongst contemporaries: his treatise went through ten editions in the twenty years after its initial publication, while his responders only published single editions.50 Nevertheless, the responses to Swetnam’s writing are no less important for how they demonstrate the manner in which these women writers fashioned their counterarguments for women’s morality based in Scripture.

---

49 Sowernam, *Esther Hath Hang’d Haman*, B2r-B3r.
50 Purkis, “Rachel Speght as ‘Criticall Reader,’” 111.
Bathsua Makin, Early Modern Educator

These arguments are taken even further in Bathsua Makin’s *The Ancient Education Gentlewomen* (1673), which focuses more specifically on women’s education. The treatise defined women’s education and demonstrates how the early modern focus on morality shaped educational content, thereby placing morality as both the content and justification for girls’ education. Bathsua Makin (ca. 1600-ca. 1681), was the first Englishwoman to defend the education of women, arguing that women should be given a full humanist education, including subjects such as rhetoric, grammar, logic, mathematics, Latin, and Greek. Written closer to the end of her life – she is estimated to have died around 1681 – the widowed Makin was under financial pressures to support herself, as evidenced by the advertisement of her teaching services at the end of the treatise. However, earlier in her career, Makin was at one point a tutor to the Princess Elizabeth, as well as other young girls of the noble class. It is important to note the distinction of her role as a tutor, rather than a governess, as this the latter role was more akin to today’s babysitters, while the former was more exclusively focused on educational instruction. Makin herself had been given an unusually robust education, similar in many ways to a classical humanist education, as evidenced by her skill in languages such as Greek; as the daughter of a schoolmaster and his wife, this is hardly surprising.51

Indeed, the importance of parents in shaping the education of their children cannot be over-emphasized, especially in the education of young girls, who often had their mother as their sole teacher, the subject of the next chapter. What, specifically, did this education look like? We cannot know the curriculum that Makin designed for the princess or her other students, however,

---

her treatise on women’s education can at least provide us with a general sense of what Makin deemed appropriate for upper class girls to learn. Although Makin was the first Englishwoman to write a defense of women’s education, the content of that education that she prescribed for girls remained particularly focused on morality and virtue, much like the texts that were examined above. Makin pointed to morality as the justification for girls’ education, and how this focus can serve to make girls more virtuous and religious. Similar to the examples given above in Swetnam and Speght’s texts, Makin also considered the example of Eve, the first woman. She referred to Eve as the beginning of evil, and that the sons of God, together with the daughters of men, multiplied wickedness through their union, wickedness that clearly originated with women. For Makin, the purpose of educating women is to “fix” their tendencies toward evil and to make them instead more moral and virtuous. She also pointed to an additional purpose of education, which is rooted in religious purposes, that education enables one to know God and better glorify him.  

Therefore, it is not for their own ends that women would be educated but rather it is for the worship of God. Furthermore, women, as Makin argues, are creatures that were created by God and blessed with reason, so they should be educated in knowledge. She further adds that because God intended for woman to be a helper to man, this is even more reason for them to be educated, so that they might help their husbands in the concerns of “his family and estate when he should most need, in sickness, weakness, absence, death, etc. Whilst we neglect to fit them for these things, we renounce God’s blessing [that] He hath appointed women for, are ungrateful to Him, cruel to them, and injurious to ourselves.”  

In their service to God and to their husbands, women needed an education.

---

53 Ibid., 75-76.
Another beneficial consequence of women’s education, Makin argues, is that it will shame men into being more virtuous when they see the upright example of the educated woman. Against arguments that an educated woman poses a threat to society, she writes that the only danger she foresees is that young men would be motivated to advance themselves in order to maintain their superiority over women. Makin is quick to follow this with her remark that she does not think it manly to “scoff at women kept ignorant on purpose to be made slaves.” Makin also specifies that she is not advocating for women to become superior to men or to step out of the roles that have already been deemed appropriate to them, that is, that women be relegated to remain within the domestic sphere — instead, she writes, she is advocating for private instruction. 54 Thus, while Makin is outspoken in her beliefs that women should be educated, it is an education that writers such as Swetnam would likely have approved of. The education Makin prescribed kept the woman within the household, and her education would make her a suitable helper to her husband and capable of running her household. Through her education, a woman’s natural weaknesses would be remedied.

Makin, however, takes a more aggressive stance when arguing for the necessity of women’s education. She argued against the “barbarous custom” to neglect women’s education, but she first provides insights into the reasons behind why the education of women had thus far been neglected; she writes that it is widely believed that women are not as intellectually capable as men, that an educated woman brings mischief and generally create chaos. The educated woman is a threat to the whole of society in this view. However, while Makin recognizes that her words will be met with opposition, she proceeds to argue that if women were educated, the whole nation would profit. 55

54 Ibid., 52, 54, 86.
55 Ibid., 52.
Bathsua Makin and Anna Maria van Schurman: Epistolary Exchanges

Makin was not alone in her opinions. While this chapter has largely been focused on literary exchanges in print, we also seen an instance of women supporting each other in their educational endeavors through private correspondence. This is demonstrated in epistolary networks that Carol Pal has called the “Republic of Women,” and the correspondence between Bathsua Makin and Anna Maria van Schurman is one example. These learned women encouraged and admired one another’s work and discussed the topic of women’s education. The correspondence between van Schurman and Makin is worth examining for how it demonstrates seventeenth century women’s interest and consideration of women’s education, and how even these private exchanges were still focused on the question of women’s morality.\(^{56}\)

Anna Maria van Schurman (1607-1678), similarly to Makin, benefitted from her father’s interest in education. Van Schurman’s father encouraged her intellectual pursuits and allowed her to be educated with her three older brothers.\(^{57}\) By the 1630s, she was well-known for her intellectual abilities, however, she very much adhered to the prescribed roles assigned to women. For instance, she stipulated that women should only dedicate time to her learning if she is not neglecting her household duties in doing so, and that a woman’s vocation is confined “within the limits of private or domestic life.”\(^{58}\) Van Schurman appealed for women’s education within the

\(^{56}\) Carol Pal, *Republic of Women*, 17.
\(^{58}\) For instance, van Schurman stipulated that women should only study those subjects which would help to instill in them a virtuous character, and better equip them to study Scripture, such as theology and languages such as Hebrew and Greek. Those subjects which would prepare one for a career in the public sphere should be avoided, as “they are not fitting or necessary.” Anna Maria van Schurman, “A Practical Problem, For the venerable and distinguished theologian, Mr. André Rivet Whether the Study of Letters is Fitting for a Christian Woman,” in *Whether a Christian Woman Should Be Educated and Other Writings From Her Intellectual Circle*, Joyce L. Irwin, ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 26, 27, 36.
roles that women were assigned, yet she does so by cleverly drawing on the purpose of virtue for women’s education to her advantage.

Both van Schurman and Makin became well-known for being particularly highly educated, especially van Schurman, who was given titles such as “the tenth Muse.” Makin clearly admired van Schurman for her intellectual abilities, and included the Dutch scholar on her list of exemplary women, serving as evidence of women’s abilities and models for readers to follow. Carol Pal, in her study, *The Republic of Women*, closely examined the epistolary network centered around van Schurman, and argues that the Dutch intellectual and her colleagues were not marginalized to the edges of the intellectual sphere, but rather that these women scholars “occupied vital and central positions in a variety of scholarly, religious, and political networks.” Even more interestingly, van Schurman and Makin corresponded with each other directly, expressing their mutual admiration and curiosity about each other’s work.

Van Schurman’s letters to the Englishwoman are very admiring and encouraging and demonstrate a high level of interest in Makin’s work as tutor to the Princess Elizabeth. We also get a deeper sense of Makin’s unusually high education – they were corresponding in Greek – and both women’s acceptance of social norms for women when van Schurman writes, “I enjoyed your letter immensely, for it shows that you have attained no superficial level of Greek eloquence. This is all the more admirable, since, while you are prevented by many domestic cares from devoting almost any time to philosophy, your muse has in no way become silent…” Makin did not allow her domestic responsibilities to prevent her from working towards her

---

62 Anna Maria van Schurman, “To the most honorable and wise lady Bathsua Makin,” in *Whether a Christian Woman Should be Educated and Other Writings from Her Intellectual Circle*, Joyce L. Irwin, ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 67.
intellectual pursuits, nor did she neglect those domestic duties. In this small instance, we see how both women privately as well as publicly adhered to the expectations that women were to care for the home, and not neglect these duties for the sake of their intellectual pursuits. Van Schurman never advocated for women to neglect their domestic duties and specified that her arguments for women to be allowed to obtain knowledge was only for those who could spare the time and would not otherwise be neglecting their duties to their families.63

By this time, Makin was working as a tutor to the Princess Elizabeth, work that van Schurman was very curious about: “I am especially keen to learn the state of the church and how go your labors concerning virtue and the education of your royal pupil.” Not only is Makin expected to be educating the princess, but she is also giving her an education which was particularly focused on virtue. Clearly, then, van Schurman was adhering to the idea that for girls, education included learning about how to be a moral woman. This can also be inferred from her letter to Makin on the subject of the Princess’s education, when she encourages Makin: “you must strive to invest your talent in educating the young princess so that you may succeed in producing a second Elizabeth, under whose holy and glorious reign your island once so extraordinarily flourished.”64 Queen Elizabeth, who not only embraced the importance that was placed on virtue and chastity for women, but also presented herself as the mother of her people, was perhaps in this sense serving as the ultimate example of how a woman’s virtue can positively influence the state, an idea that we have seen in Vives’s writing, and one that van Schurman was also supporting here.65 Therefore, Bathsua Makin was doing important work in

64 van Schurman, “To the most estimable lady Bathsua Makin,” 67-68.
her tutoring of the young Princess Elizabeth, and her correspondence with van Schurman demonstrates the focus that these two learned women placed on women’s moral education.

Finally, to return to the focus on Eve in this debate over women’s morality, we can see the role of Agrippa’s work in instigating this argument. Agrippa addressed the Eve debate as such: “Christ has put an end to this curse… God has a preference for no one, for in Christ there is neither male nor female, but a new creation.”66 The fact that this treatise was translated into English around the same time that Makin was writing her work on women’s education demonstrates how this debate was in this period of particular focus in the debate surrounding women and their morality.

**Conclusion**

These literary exchanges focused on women’s education were branches shooting off of the larger debate concerning women, and the “question of their innate immorality versus their natural morality being made in the image of God.”67 In early modern England, women such as Rachel Speght, Jane Anger, Ester Sowernam, and Bathsua Makin, influenced by historical contexts such as the Reformation, pushed back against these misogynistic claims that women were inherently wicked and argued that women ought to have a (moral) education. Makin, in particular, used this focus on morality in order to focus on women’s education more specifically. In the next chapter, we will see how mothers continued with this focus and were particularly well-placed to exercise the authority they had over their children and households to shape the moral education of their children.

66 Agrippa, *Declamation on the Nobility and Preeminence of the Female Sex*, 96.

Chapter Two
The Mother’s Legacy and Early Education

“Proverb 1. 8. My sonne, heare the instruction of thy father, and forsake not the lawe of thy mother.”

The above quote, a reference to Proverbs 1:8, was included on the title page of Dorothy Leigh’s (1616) work, titled The Mothers Blessing. This treatise is an example of a mother’s legacy, a subgenre of prescriptive literature in early modern England. In order to better understand education in the period and how it reflected and shaped women’s roles, it is important to consider the figure of the ideal mother in early education, as this is where instruction began for many children. Parents’ legacies, written by both fathers and mothers, are resources that can provide insights into this early education, as well as the purpose behind it. The subgenre of legacy writing demonstrates the concern and care that parents took in the education of their children. Mother’s legacies, especially, demonstrate the importance that mothers placed in their role as educator, as well as the manner in which they expressed their maternal authority.

Furthermore, these works provide insight into what mothers taught their children. Supposedly written at the time of their death, these legacy writings allow us to understand what mothers most wanted their children to know and how these instructions were often shaped by the gender of their children.

Throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it was seen as the mother’s responsibility to teach her young children literacy skills, as well as foundational religious education; these were often taught simultaneously, as children learned to read and write using

---

verses from the Bible. Mother’s legacies to their children also reflect these early modern views on education. This posthumous didactic literature is one of the few instances in which we can see a female exerting authority over a male, in those cases in which the mother is addressing her son. Similar to what we saw in the first chapter, Scripture figures strongly in these didactic works as well. In legacy writings, Scripture often served a double purpose, as the content of mothers’ instruction, as well as a means by which to lend authority to their teaching. In addition to Biblical education, mothers were also expected to teach their daughters domestic tasks and household chores, in order to prepare them to run their own household once they are married.

This chapter will explore the role of the mother in early education, and how it was defined as well as demonstrated in legacy literature. Father’s legacies to their children will also be examined in order to provide a point of comparison against those written by mothers, serving to further clarify the role of each parent in early education of young children.

While there have been some works which consider the early education of children by parents, and by mothers specifically, there has not been a comparative study on this topic which looks at both those written by fathers and mothers simultaneously. Furthermore, the didactic literature – of which legacy literature is a part – is a genre that has not been fully utilized as a means by which to study this particular aspect of early modern society. Jessica Murphy’s *Virtuous Necessity*, which is entirely focused on prescriptive literature, does briefly mention in some sense the role of women in the household. Murphy writes that women’s virtue was of particular importance for how it was seen as influential in the proper function of society, as women’s influence extended out from her household and into the broader community. One of

---

4 Murphy, *Virtuous Necessity*, 4.
the means through which this influence spread out from the household was in how she educated her children, who would grow up to become members of society, particularly if they were boys. Margaret Ezell’s *The Patriarch’s Wife* is helpful provides a clear explanation of the gendered differences in education for boys and girls. Ezell argues that “for the majority of women, given the prevalent opinion in their society that females were ‘weak morally and intellectually,’ the poor quality of their education set in motion what one critic calls a vicious circle, in which women were criticized for the very behavior that their education had instilled.” Ezell’s book is most helpful for how it revises the previously held notion that women were not well-educated in this time period, providing evidence that many early modern women were in fact highly praised for their intellectual prowess. Nevertheless, this still does not entirely eradicate the more patriarchal ideas within early modern society, which held that women were not as intellectually capable as men. It is also important to note that education was often linked to a public life, thereby providing another justification to neglect women’s education, as argued by J. R. Brink. However, at the time, numerous schools for girls were established throughout the early modern period, such as Bathsua Makin’s school for girls in London. The seventeenth century also saw the establishment of Quaker boarding schools, which sought to educate children regardless of sex.5 Nevertheless, the general consensus in this period was to educate one’s daughters to have an aptitude for domestic skills such as needlework, as well as an education on the importance of virtues such as chastity and obedience; all of this was in preparation to one day be a wife and mother, and this instruction largely took place at home.6

---

Amongst historians, there is a general consensus that the vast majority of children were educated at home until about the age of seven. Both mothers and fathers were concerned about their children’s education. Nevertheless, there were some differences between how mothers and fathers thought about, prioritized, and educated their children; furthermore, it was the mother who most often had the day-to-day responsibility of educating her young children, especially if they were daughters. Thomas More is often referenced as an example of a sixteenth-century father taking particular interest in the education of his daughters; however, he was an exceptional case who nevertheless assumed limitations on women’s intellectual capabilities. Indeed, Jennifer Heller argues that More and other humanist writers such as Vives, while advocators for girls’ education, simultaneously believed that girls needed this education as a means by which to control their weaker and more corrupt female nature. More himself wrote that the “‘soil of a woman’s brain’ was naturally more deficient,” thereby demonstrating his concepts of gendered differences in the purposes behind education for women. While these humanists were certainly not as punitive towards women as Joseph Swetnam was in his *The Arraignment of Leuud, Idle, Froward, and Vnconstant Women Or the Vanities of them* (1615), they nevertheless did have some misgivings in regard to women’s morality and intellectual ability.

Furthermore, as will be further examined below, while fathers did of course care for their children, the patriarchal structure of early modern society meant that they had added socioeconomic concerns when it came to their sons; in other words, upper-class fathers had the extra burden of ensuring the continuation of their familial line, as well as the continued existence

---

8 Ezell, *The Patriarch’s Wife*, 16-17.
of the family estate through his firstborn son. This pressure necessitated the gendered differences in the purposes behind education for sons and daughters.

Didactic literature prescribed the role of educators to mothers and mothers’ legacy writing, itself a subgenre of didactic literature, adheres to this prescribed role while also demonstrating how early modern English mothers exercised their authority. Mothers were charged with teaching literacy and religion, subjects that were in this period inextricably intertwined. The legacy subgenre clearly illustrates this, as well as the manner in which mothers upheld the patriarchal purposes behind differentiated education for sons and daughters, even when they themselves were unusually highly educated. Mothers’ legacies provide insights into the content of education for both sons and daughters, the manner in which mothers exercised their authority under the purview of their husbands, and how mothers expressed their own authority. Drawing on ideas surrounding women’s status and morality that was examined in the first chapter, mothers often grounded their authority in religion and argued that it was their duty to instruct their children so that they might grow to be good Christians. This chapter will be organized into two parts, the first considering the manner by which mothers legitimized their writing, thereby providing insights into their maternal authority, and the second focusing on what their legacies specifically instructed depending on the gender of their child(ren) to whom their legacy was addressed.

Mothers assigned the role of early educator

Mothers were assigned the role of educator for their children in directives contained within prescriptive writings. To return to Vives’s *The Education of a Christian Woman* (1523, 161.

---

10 Ibid., 161.
11 Ibid., 34-35.
English edition circa 1530), we can see the Spanish humanist focusing particularly on the importance of the mother’s role as educator for her daughter. In the dedicatory note to Queen Catherine of Aragon, Vives more directly defined his views on women and the purpose of their moral education and throughout the work, he reiterated again and again the importance of women’s chastity.\(^\text{12}\)

Designed to be applicable to all women, regardless of social class and despite his royal audience, Vives proceeded through women’s three life stages that depended on her marital status: virgin, married woman, and widow. Vives shared the purpose-driven view of education, which was so prominent in this period, and wrote that because women do not have the public responsibilities outside the home, as men do, their education would naturally be simpler. He wrote, “A woman’s only care is chastity; therefore, when this has been thoroughly elucidated, she may be considered to have received sufficient instruction.”\(^\text{13}\) This focus on chastity can be seen in later works as well, such as Elizabeth Joscelin’s, which will be further examined below.

In Vives’s view, the mother herself was to serve as a model for her daughter to follow, and he instructs Queen Catharine to serve as this example for the Princess Mary: “Your daughter Mary will read these recommendations and will reproduce them as she models herself on the example of your goodness and wisdom to be found within her own home.” Not only is this treatise to be used as an educational tool by the queen for the princess, but the princess is also expected to follow the example of her mother within their home, as the queen leads and teaches her daughter. As they grew older, girls were supposed to stay within the company of other young girls, and always in the presence of her mother or nurse, who were to direct them towards


virtuous behavior. As examined in Chapter 1, women were thought to be naturally more inclined towards wickedness and were thought to be unable – at least at a young age – to distinguish between good and evil; therefore, she should be kept entirely ignorant of evil things. Girls were to be so indoctrinated for household work, that even her toys should be modeled after common items found in the home, so that she might learn the names and uses for them. A girl’s education began at a young age, with a consideration for how to teach her domestic skills that she will need for the future running of her own house. Vives expressed this purpose explicitly: “let her begin by learning things that contribute to the cultivation of the mind and the care and management of the home,” once she is of an age when she can begin learning literacy skills. Vives continued to recommend that she learn certain household tasks, such as spinning wool, needlework, and reading to better improve herself.14 Thus, here we see the kind of education that mothers were directed to give to their daughters.

**Legitimating Legacy Writing**

As has been shown, mothers were clearly expected to take an active role in their children’s early education. How did women carry out this role? Legacy literature can provide some insights, which confirm previous studies that have strived to answer this question. These works are fascinating for how they show mothers exercising authority, yet only at the brink of their demise; they are “caught between the contradictory self-assertion which the genre allows, and the self-negation it demands.”15 While feminist historians in the 1990s argued that this was a signal for these writers’ oppression, Jennifer Heller points instead to the *ars moriendi* tradition in

---

the early modern period, which encouraged the regular meditation upon death.\textsuperscript{16} This literary tradition not only demonstrates the familiarity that early moderns experienced with death but also provided instruction on how to die well.\textsuperscript{17}

Legacy writing to one’s children falls under this tradition as well, and these works often saw parents providing spiritual instruction to their children which encouraged a contemplation of death. For example, John Norris’s *Spiritual Counsel, Or, the Father’s Advice to His Children* (1694) encouraged his children to contemplate death by telling them to “Place your selves frequently upon your Deathbeds, in your Coffins, and in your Graves. Act over frequently in your Minds, the Solemnity of your own Funerals; and entertain your imaginations with all the lively Scenes of Mortality” so that they could better contemplate “Heaven, Hell, Death and Judgement.”\textsuperscript{18} People — including children — needed to remember that they were mortal, creating a sense of urgency to live a good Christian life in order to go to Heaven after death. For parents, it was their responsibility and duty to teach their children this in order to ensure the salvation of their sons and daughters’ souls and legacy writing was a means by which they provided this instruction.

Three works in the legacy genre are worth close examination, both for their popularity and for their definitive nature of these published legacies: Dorothy Leigh’s *The Mother’s Blessing* (1616), Elizabeth Joscelin’s *The Mothers Legacie, to Her Vnborne Childe* (1624), and Baroness Elizabeth Richardson Cramond’s *A Ladies Legacie to Her Davghters* (1645). Sermons, words, and prayers of a person on their deathbed were perceived as particularly significant, as

\textsuperscript{16} Heller, *The Mother’s Legacy*, 179-180.
\textsuperscript{17} Olivia Weisser, *Ill Composed: Sickness, Gender, and Belief in Early Modern England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015) 73.
\textsuperscript{18} John Norris, 1657-1711, *Spiritual Counsel, Or, the Father’s Advice to His Children* (London, Printed for S. Manship…, 1694), 76-77.
the dying person drew nearer to God at the end of their life. This societal context was certainly a factor for the popularity of these works. Leigh’s piece in particular was extremely popular, going through twenty-three reprints between 1616 and 1674, while Joscelin’s went through eight editions between 1624 to 1684.19

The following sections will examine the three mothers’ legacies more closely, considering their intended audiences; whether their writing was meant to be public, private, or both; these mothers’ purpose in writing; and the strategies they employed to legitimize and justify their authoritative instruction. The mother’s legacy genre, in a similar manner to the more general prescriptive works by women writers that were examined in Chapter 1, both shaped and reflected early education in this period. In mother’s legacies, we can see women taking the arguments that were prevalent in the period in regard to women’s morality and education and using them to fashion their own educational content for their children in an authoritative manner.

I have chosen these three works in particular not only for their popularity, but also for the variety in the intended audiences amongst these works. For instance, Leigh addressed her work to her three sons, while Richardson was writing to her daughters and daughters-in-law. Joscelin, a woman about to give birth, was addressing her work to the child she had yet to meet. These differences shaped the way each of these women chose to write their legacies, tailoring them to their audiences. The gendered nature of education in the seventeenth century is reflected in these legacies, in both how these mothers addressed their children and also in how they legitimized their writing and demonstrated — or hid — evidence of their own education.

Dorothy Leigh, *A Mothers Blessing*

Dorothy Leigh (née Kempe) was born to a gentry family that could trace its history back to Edward I; closer to her own time, Leigh’s great-aunt was Jane Colt, Thomas More’s wife. Leigh’s Puritan family was dedicated to Christianity, serving as patrons to various preachers and bestowing on them the family rectory. Sylvia Brown infers from the slight evidence available that religion was the deciding factor in Leigh’s choice of a husband: while not “rich in the gifts of the world,” Ralph Leigh could have been chosen to be Dorothy Kempe’s husband because he was “rich in the gifts of the Spirit.” Leigh’s legacy informs us that Ralph shared his wife’s concern that their children be brought up in the faith. Firmly Protestant, Leigh expressed that she was thankful that England was Protestant and recommends that children, both boys and girls, ought to learn to read so that they might study the Bible. 20

Leigh’s writing is characterized by her boldness, and yet simultaneous adherence to the stipulations of the time, which put limits on what a woman could properly say in public. She intended her work to be both public and private, addressing it to her sons — George, John, and William — while also clearly writing for publication, thereby serving as an instructional text for a much broader audience. 21 By the time she was writing, Leigh was a widow, and in some sense she takes advantage of this. She writes that she knew her husband, Ralph Leigh, wanted them to be brought up “godlily,” and instructed her to see that their sons be “well instructed and brought up in knowledge.” As for Leigh, she could not help but to “fulfill his will in all things,” as was her duty as a mother and in following her husband’s instructions, and she herself desires “no greater comfort in the World,” than to see her sons “grow in godlinesse” so that they might go to

---

21 Ibid., 4.
We can see the mutual concern that these parents had for the education of their children, as well as the familial hierarchy that Leigh was using to her advantage. The reader has no choice but to take her word for it, that her husband did indeed give this order, an order that Leigh uses to legitimize her writing.

In writing this prescriptive text, Leigh was simply doing her duty as a wife and a mother. As a wife, she was fulfilling her last duty given to her by her husband, while as a mother, she was writing publicly so as to ensure that all three of her sons would benefit from this work:

“Wherefore setting aside all feare, I haue adventured to shew my imperfections to the view of the World, not regarding what censure shall for this bee laid vpon mee, so that herein I may shew my selfe a louing Mother, and a dutifull Wife.”

Given the patriarchal familial model, it is not at all unlikely that Leigh’s husband might very well have given her this directive. Leigh was legitimizing her writing not only as a wife following orders, but as a mother doing her duty to ensure that all of her children have the benefit of her teachings.

She even momentarily addresses fellow mothers, who, though they might “blush” at Leigh’s “boldnesse,” nevertheless are advised in *The Mothers Blessing* to not feel ashamed to show their weaknesses, but to instead work to remedy the sin that entered into their posterity through them. Careful to instruct that they work to be second to men, giving them “the first and chiefe place,” Leigh instructs her fellow women to show “how carefull we are to seeke Christ to cast [sin] out of us, and our posterity, and how fearfull we are that our sinne should sinke any of them to the lowest part of the earth,” that is, Hell. In this section, Leigh was carefully adhering to the hierarchy that was prescribed in early modern England. Similar to Bathsua Makin and

---

22 Dorothy Leigh, *Mothers Blessing*, 17.
23 Ibid., 17-18.
24 Ibid., 24.
Anna Maria van Schurman, Leigh did not call for women to shirk their domestic duties or to rise above men; rather, she instructed that mothers needed to educate their children in religion and spirituality in order to save their souls. Leigh clearly felt that in their instruction, mothers were making very real and important contributions and has placed a high value on this educational work.

Furthermore, we see a glimpse of Leigh’s views as to why it is her — and other mothers’ — responsibility to provide this spiritual education to her children. She writes that sin is passed on to children through their mothers, an echo of ideas such as Vives’s, that a “virtuous disposition” can be passed on to children through their mother’s breastmilk. However, if a virtuous disposition can be passed on to children, it follows that a sinful nature can be passed down as well. This is the idea that Leigh was arguing in her work and serves to support her point that it is therefore the mother’s responsibility to ensure that her children are given the necessary religious education in order to enable them to reject this sin nature.

Leigh also recognized that it was not entirely acceptable for women to be writing publicly, ideas that we saw contemporary writers such as Speght and Makin grapple with. She likewise found it necessary to provide justifications for her decision to write publicly. Leigh outlined these justifications in a list of a variety of reasons. First, her motherly zeal and affection for her sons, which, in a similar manner to the Apostle Paul who would not separate himself from God or disobey Him for the sake of his brethren, she, too, was refusing to adhere to the silent role that society prescribed. In comparing herself to the Apostle Paul, Leigh was implying that her actions were likewise in obedience and service to God. She continued to give

25 Vives, similarly to fellow humanists of the time, instructed that women should breastfeed their children themselves, which would help to instill in their children a virtuous disposition. Vives, *The Education of a Christian Woman*, 54.
further justifications for her writing, which also in turn served to further defend her outspokenness.

Interestingly, she lists as one of her reasons her wish that her sons would go on to teach their own children, “be they Males or Females” so that they “may, in their youth learne to read the Bible in their own Mother tongue,” which she sees as an effective aid in encouraging their godliness. Secondly, she was writing in order to inspire her own children to do the same, that is, to write for their own children. While Leigh was legitimizing her writing and instructing her children, she was also adhering to the role that early modern English society has assigned to her as a mother, to teach her children by being an example to them.

Elizabeth Joscelin, *The Mothers Legacie to her Vnborne Childe*

When comparing how Elizabeth Joscelin legitimized her writing to Leigh’s methods, there are some similarities, especially in how they deferred to their husband’s authority. However, Joscelin’s writing is interesting for how she has hidden her own educational background, which was unusually extensive for a woman in this period. In *The Mothers Legacie to her Vnborne childe*, Joscelin authoritatively asserts her own desires for how she wants her child cared for and educated. While Joscelin did include some rhetorical apologies in writing as Leigh did, her writing is nearly as apologetic or concerned with legitimizing her instruction. The reasons for this lie in Joscelin’s intentions for writing. Her legacy was very much in keeping with the *ars moriendi* tradition, a spiritual preparation for death. Childbirth in the early modern period was dangerous, and women such as Joscelin would prepare themselves for the very real possibility of their death in childbirth. Furthermore, as a private – in the sense that Joscelin was

---

27 Ibid., 26.
28 Weissner, *Ill Composed*, 141.
more than likely not intending to publish her work – devotional text intended for her immediate family, Joscelin was writing in an entirely appropriate manner for women.

Elizabeth Joscelin was the only child of Richard Brooke and Elizabeth Chaderton, who were fairly well-to-do: Chaderton was an heiress, while Brooke was a gentleman of status. Joscelin’s parents were estranged, however, resulting in the young Elizabeth Joscelin remaining with her mother at her grandfather’s household, while her father was away in Ireland. She was named the inheritor of her mother’s lands, rather than her father, further evidence of the estrangement between her father and mother. After her mother’s death when she was only six years old, an even that she likely witnessed, and was greatly affected by, according to her editor, Goad. Educated by her grandfather, Bishop Chaderton, Joscelin was given an education that was similar to what a young upper-class boy would have normally received in this period, which included subjects such as Latin, history, grammar, logic, rhetoric, arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy. After her — fortunately much happier — marriage to Taurrell Joscelin, Elizabeth Joscelin focused on Divinity, and matters of spirituality.29 Her personal dedication to spiritual matters would only logically lead her to encourage her own child to follow this same pursuit: if her child was a son, she advised him to pursue a career as a minister.30 In any case, Joscelin’s preparations in the event of her death sadly proved prescient, as she died soon after giving birth to a daughter.

In her legacy, Joscelin legitimized her work by referencing her motherly zeal, quite similar to Leigh’s point that she wanted to ensure the spiritual welfare of her child. She clearly saw this as her responsibility, when she wrote that she was seized by “the apprehension of

danger that might prevent me from executing that care I so exceedingly desired, I meane in
religious training of our Childe.” First, however, Joscelin wrote to ensure the physical well-being
of her baby, in the case that she not be there to make sure of it herself. In her legacy, she gives
her husband advice on how to choose a wet nurse, specifying that that the nurse needs to be of a
“mild and honest disposition.” Joscelin’s work reads as a last will and testament, providing
instructions to her husband on how she wants their child to be breast-fed, weaned, and educated,
all responsibilities that would normally be under her purview, had she survived. For her baby,
she gives instructions on what career she would have the child pursue if he was a son, and if a
daughter, the extent she wanted her to be educated. While these instructions were quite specific,
and given with authority, Joscelin nevertheless ultimately deferred to her husband. This is seen
when, upon concluding her wishes for her child’s future, whether a boy or girl, she concludes
with, “Yet I leave it to thy will.”31 While she has made her wishes known, and has provided very
specific instruction, Joscelin ultimately leaves the decisions to her husband, and seems to trust
him to do what is best for their child.

Elizabeth Richardson, A Ladies Legacie to Her Daughters

Elizabeth Richardson’s work, A Ladies Legacie to Her Daughters, is perhaps the least
concerned of these authors with legitimizing her writing, as she was writing more exclusively to
her daughters. Richardson had perhaps a rather more turbulent — in a financial sense — life than
Joscelin or Leigh. Although she was related to noble families who enjoyed close proximity to the
monarchy, her first husband went into extensive debt, was subsequently imprisoned in a debtor’s
jail, and died there, leaving Richardson and their six children bankrupt and alone. However, her

31 Elizabeth Joscelin (1596-1622), The Mothers Legacie, to Her Vnborne Childe (London: printed by John Hauiland,
for William Barret, 1624), B4v.
situation certainly improved with her second marriage to the Lord Chief Justice of the King’s Bench, Sir Thomas Richardson; indeed, he is even rumored to have purchased her title for her, so that she became the Baroness Cramond. In her legacy, Richardson primarily includes set prayers for her daughters to use, and she includes her daughters-in-law among them, instructing them just as she does her own daughters and establishing her maternal authority.

In addressing her daughters, and covering topics such as their instruction, Richardson was writing on appropriate subjects for women: their moral education. Rhetorically, Richardson only defended her choice to publish, thereby going into the public sphere. Richardson references her role as a mother in order to justify her instruction to her daughters and directs them to “peruse, ponder, practice, and make use of this Booke according to my intention, though of it selfe unworthy.” Richardson informs her readers that when she first began writing, she had no purpose at all to make this treatise public, intending it only for the use of herself and her children. Giving in to the persuasions of those around her who wanted the use of her instructional text, we are told, Richardson ventured to “beare all censures,” and asks for “patience and pardon.” While readers may indeed find “blameworthy faults,” and justly condemn her boldness, she gives the excuse that her text is merely devotions and prayers, subjects that “surely concernes and belongs to women, as well as to the best learned men.”

While Richardson – and indeed, many of the women writers that have been examined – did not need to defend her writing, the moment she set out to publish, she found it necessary to defend her work, expecting the criticisms of society. However, her defense is interesting for how she argues that the subjects she is writing on, devotions and prayers, are certainly appropriate

---

32 Brown, “Introduction to Elizabeth Richardson,” in Women’s Writing in Stuart England, 144-145.
33 Elizabeth Richardson, Baroness Cramond (d. 1651), A Ladies Legacie to Her Daughters (London: Printed by Tho. Harper, and are to be sold at his house in Little Britaine, 1645), 1-3.
topics for women to be writing on, and indeed belongs to women. Her work began as a private text for the use of herself and her family, specifically her daughters, and she is clearly using the prominent idea in post-Reformation England, which held that women and men, while not equal in society, were at least equal spiritually. Thus, Richardson was entitled to write on spiritual matters, especially as she was teaching her daughters, who’s spiritual education is, for her, a kind of second labor to ensure their spiritual life one day in Heaven.34

Taking all of these mother’s legacies together, we can see how these mothers strived to meet the assigned role as early educator to their children and adhere to the education that prescriptive writers such as Vives has recommended. While overlapping with other contemporary genres such as the *ars moriendi* tradition, these legacies also fit under the prescriptive literature genre for how they instruct not only their children but also fellow parents in how to educate their own children. Writers such as Leigh and Richardson, by choosing to write publicly, had to address the questionable appropriateness of this decision to their readers, much in a similar manner as other women writers of the period. Nevertheless, in focusing on the education of their children, tied as it was to religion, these mothers authoritatively provided instruction on how to ensure the salvation of their children’s souls.

**Fathers’ Legacies**

Fathers’ legacies contain striking differences as well as similarities to legacies written by mothers. While young girls were educated from a young age in housewifery skills, boys were prepared for a career outside of the home. It was this education that fathers seem to have been particularly anxious to ensure. Interestingly, we do also see fathers making similar rhetorical

---

apologies for their writing, although there is not the same tension evident in women writers’ published works. For instance, while we have seen mothers having to in some sense argue for why their children should follow their instruction — such as Richardson counting even her daughters-in-law as children under her maternal authority — fathers’ legacies demonstrate an inherent confidence that their orders would be obeyed.

An example of this is seen within Sir Henry Slingsby’s legacy, titled *A Father’s Legacy* (1658). Sir Henry, who was writing before his execution after his royalist efforts were declared treasonous by the Commonwealth, and a large portion of his legacy is explaining the motives for his actions. Slingsby’s writing demonstrates his patriarchal authority over his children, as head of the household. This is evident from how he clearly expects his instructions to be heeded by his children:

> I am confident you will be ready to give the more serious attention, in regard it proceeds from his mouth, and devotion of his heart; who with a parental and tender affection ever loved you while he was living: and now dying leave you this *Memorial* as my *last Legacy* for your future benefit, improvement and direction.35

Slingsby’s changes between third and first person serve to make his writing more authoritative, as well as personal, respectively. In the third person, his writing is more distant, as he describes that it is their father who is writing, someone who has authority over them. Then, in the first person, his text becomes less distanced, and more personable, as he writes of how he is creating this last text for their benefit just before his death. In appealing first to his role as a father, and head of his patriarchal household, Slingsby established his authority. Only after doing this does he then speak to his children on a more personal and relational level.

---

Interestingly, Slingsby did in fact have a daughter, although he only directly addressed his sons and heir, differentiating instructions to them based on who was oldest, and therefore to inherit the title and estate. He did make a mention of their sister, instructing them to give his “dear Bab” his blessing, and to “tell her from a dying Father, that she needs no other example then her vertuous Mother for her Directory: in whose steps, I am confident, she will walk religiously. Her modest and blameless deman can promise nothing less.”36 Importantly, he defers to his wife for their daughter’s education. And the education that he prescribed was entirely in keeping with what we have seen in other prescriptive works, that is, an education based on morals and virtues. Finally, he was not in any way concerned about his daughter’s education, since she had her mother — who was herself virtuous — as an example to follow. Once again, we see how mothers were expected to provide an early education for their children, especially for their daughters, who they were expected not only to teach through instruction but also by being worthy examples for their children to follow.

What they taught: Parental concern for spiritual welfare

What did legacy writers most want their children to know, and how was this information provided? As briefly mentioned above, legacy writers were most concerned for their children’s spiritual welfare. Therefore, the focus of their legacies was largely on religious education. However, this instruction was also differentiated by gender in terms of both how mothers and fathers addressed their sons or daughters, as well as the actual content of instruction. Fathers clearly prioritized the education of their sons over their daughters, or at least deferred to their wives to educate their daughters, as evidenced by Sir Henry Slingsby. Mothers, however, tended

36 Slingsby, A Father’s Legacy, 54-55.
to demonstrate more general concern for the education of both sons and daughters, although there were still gendered differences in the content that they provided in their legacies.

Writing in post-Reformation England, these Protestant women employed the idea of the priesthood of all believers, which allowed for all Christians — including women — to read and study Scripture independently. In a similar manner to Rachel Speght, each of these women make it clear that they are well-versed in Scripture and employ Biblical passages to justify their instruction. As mothers, they also draw on Scripture to provide theological instruction to their children. These women writers take this use of Scripture still further, describing their religious teaching as a kind of “second labor” to give life to their children. This argument serves not only to legitimize their writing, but also as a recognition of their responsibility as a parent to ensure their children’s spiritual salvation. Leigh describes the self-sacrificing lengths that parents often go to for the welfare of their children, even risking their own souls through illicit efforts, such as bribery or perjury, all for the sake of their children’s enrichment. However, Leigh argues that these parents have misinterpreted Scripture, and that they are focusing too much on earthly material things and forgetting the spiritual, which is the way to truly enrich one’s children. Leigh instead instructs her children to follow Christ’s example, and quotes Matthew 6:33: “First seeke the kingdome of God and his righteousnesse, and then all these things shall be administered to you.” 37 Not only is her argument supported by Scripture, which she deftly interprets, but she is here instructing her children — as well as any parents who read her published work — to follow God and all their earthly needs will be satisfied.

Similar to Richardson, Leigh references Isaiah 49: 15 when she makes the point that she is laboring for their second, spiritual birth:

---

Can a Mother forget the child of her wombe? {Es. 49. 15.} As if he should say, Is it possible, that shee, which hath carried her child within her, so neere her hart, and brought it forth into this world with so much bitter paine, so many grones and cries, can forget it? nay rather, will shee not labour now till Christ be formed in it? … Will shee not instruct it in the youth, and admonish it in the age, and pray for it continually? Will shee not be afraid, that the child which shee endured such paine for, should endure endlesse paine in hell?\(^{38}\)

This text provides a rich explanation of the feelings of a mother for her child, and how her responsibilities change as the child grows. From giving birth to providing instruction, the mother is constantly concerned for her child’s welfare, both physical and spiritual. The ultimate purpose, of course, is driven by the fear that the child who she has worked so hard to care for, could end up spending their eternal life in hell. Addressing her writing to her sons, Leigh’s legacy therefore aims to be comprehensive, teaching them how to pray privately and manage their personal spiritual lives; how to choose a godly wife; how to be a good head of household in dealing with one’s servants; how to lead the household spiritually; and even what to name their own children to encourage their godliness, as well as when to begin educating them.

In her advice to her sons on how to raise their own children, Leigh provides insights into how she herself would raise her sons. For instance, she specifies that children should begin their education at four years old or earlier, by teaching them to read, regardless of gender, and to continue their literary education until the age of 10. Children are to learn in this time how to serve “God, their King & Country by reading.” Spiritual education is combined with teaching literacy skills. Another example of these interconnected educational subjects is seen in Leigh’s instructions for how to deal with servants. She instructs her sons to ensure that their domestic servants are able to read, and that their skill should be of a high enough level that they are capable of reading the Ten Commandments; furthermore, her sons are instructed to encourage

\(^{38}\) Ibid., 23.
their servants to spend all their free time reading the Bible, “so that they may come the better to
know the will of God written in his Word.” 39

Similar to Leigh’s instructions, Elizabeth Joscelin provides more insights into how she
wants her children to be educated, specifications that she differentiates based on her unborn
child’s gender. She instructs that a girl does not need to know more than learning the Bible,
housewifery skills, writing, and “good workes.” 40 If the child is a daughter and she does not
survive to educate her herself, Joscelin wants her to be sent to her mother’s for her education; if
the child is a son, Joscelin also provided instructions, telling her husband that she hopes he will
become a minister, a wish that she shared with Leigh for their sons. 41 While it is possible that
this wish was included as a means by which to demonstrate her own piety, it was likely to have
been a genuine wish given her religious education and continued study. 42 It is worth noting that
while they have hopes for their sons’ future careers, neither woman provides instruction on how
the education necessary for those careers should be obtained. That particular kind of detail is
reserved only for their daughters, whom they were likely to have educated directly. These
instructions provide insights into the gendered nature of education, as well as how far mothers
could go in their instruction of their children.

Due to these gendered differences in education, mothers provided more detailed
instructions on the later education of daughters, rather than sons. In some instances, we can see
continuations from earlier texts such as Vives’s. For example, Leigh focuses on the issue of

39 Ibid., 30-31, 33.
41 Ibid., 14; Leigh, The Mothers Blessing, 70.
42 Elizabeth Joscelin was educated by her uncle, a bishop, and she “almost certainly made a close study of the
Geneva Bible, whose translation and annotations were favoured by the more godly sort of Protestant.” While this is
a demonstration of her own piety, nevertheless as a Christian, she would certainly have desired this same piety in her
own children, in order to ensure the salvation of their souls. What better means to achieve this security, than in the
pursuit of a career in ministry? Brown, Women’s Writing in Stuart England, 98.
chastity, while also providing insights into her perspective on women. She writes, “the woman who is not truly chaste, hath no virtue in her.” Chastity, for women, is the door to all other virtues; if she is chaste, she “is a great partaker of all other virtues.” Without it, however, she cannot be considered virtuous at all. 43 This idea directly connects to Vives’s argument, that a woman’s chief concern should be chastity, as discussed above. 44 This focus on chastity as the most important virtue connects to Leigh’s later instruction in her work, on how to choose a godly wife, a matter of great consequence.

Returning to the themes of the first chapter, we once again see a consideration of the figure of Eve. In Leigh’s mind, the unchaste wife could only lead her husband into further sin, much as Eve led Adam to taste the forbidden fruit in the Garden. In her discussion of choosing a wife, Leigh’s language becomes the most direct when she tells her sons that if they obtain godly wives whom they love, then they will not be forsaking her; however, if her sons obtain ungodly wives that do not love them, then Leigh writes, “I am sure I will forsake you.” 45 If her sons do not have the good sense to choose a godly wife whom they can love to the end and who love them in return, then Leigh would want nothing to do with her foolish sons who made the mistake of choosing unsuitable wives. A failed marriage is to fail at all that Leigh is trying to teach her sons in her legacy.

Fathers’ legacies likewise demonstrate this gendered difference in the instruction they gave and provide insights into their conceptions of the woman’s place in society. This can be gleaned both in those few instances in which fathers write directly about their wives or daughters, or even women in general, as well as what they focus on for their sons’ instruction.

43 Leigh, The Mothers Blessing, 27.
44 Vives, The Education of a Christian Woman, 47.
For example, Sir Henry Slingsby wrote that his daughter needed no other example or education than what she can obtain from her mother, “in whose sets,” he is sure, “she will walk religiously.” For Slingsby, it is for fathers to educate their sons — or at least to supervise it — and for mothers to educate their daughters. Furthermore, Sir Walter Raleigh, writing to his son as well as to his descendants, identified the choice of a wife to be the second most important concern (behind the choice of friends). He describes women as seductive and cautions his son against being taken in by beauty, that “Witcherie.” Yet he also advises against marrying an unattractive woman, so that their children will not also be unattractive, comparing the process of choosing a wife to breeding horses. After choosing his wife, Raleigh instructs his son to share the estate with her equally; however, this was only to be done while he is living. After which, the wife is to inherit only that which is appropriate for his station; no part of the estate should be left to her, since it will really belong to whoever her second husband will be, a “stranger.” He concludes by firmly putting women in their place: “Wives were ordained to continue the generations of Men… and therefore thy house and estate which liveth in thy Sonne, & not thy Wife, is to be preferred.” It is the purpose of the wife to bear children, in order to ensure the continuation of her husband’s estate, after which all focus is given to the son.

Interestingly, Raleigh is so focused on his concerns for the estate, that he does not give much consideration as to the character of his son’s future wife, as the other legacy writers do. The closest he comes to considering her character is to instruct his son not to marry too young a wife, because she will surely prefer men her own age and betray her husband, although in a sense, this could still be construed as connected to concern for the estate — any children would

---

then have questionable parentage, for instance. While Raleigh’s practical advice book for his son heir is by far the least concerned with spiritual matters out of the other works that are here examined, it nevertheless demonstrates the deep concern that these patriarchs held for their estate and the continuation of their patriarchal lineage.

Disinterested as it is in religious matters, Raleigh’s *Instructions to His Sonne* is by no means the standard form of advice provided by fathers in their legacies, and indeed, some fathers did demonstrate a more spiritual concern for their children’s souls, much like the mother’s legacies that were examined earlier. For instance, numerous writers specified that one should pray first thing in the morning, before anything else was done. Indeed, John Norris wrote, “Let this be the first thing you do, I mean before you take any Secular or Worldly thing in hand.” He then continues to recommend fasting days, how to physically arrange oneself for prayer, and to always be considering Heaven, Hell, and one’s mortality.

These instructions are strikingly similar to those given by Richardson and Leigh, especially. Richardson’s legacy is almost entirely consisted of prayers, and she specifies when to use each one, for time of day, day of the week, when one is going to church, before one leaves the church bench, as well as for particular moments of need, such as resisting temptation, for sickness, asking for spiritual graces. Richardson even included a set prayer to pray before praying, as a preparation — similar in this sense to Norris’s advice to assume a particularly reverent bodily posture to prepare for reverently approaching God in prayer. Leigh instructions her children to pray often, at least “twise a day… and acknowledge the infirmities, and confesse that thou canst not pray, and desire GOD to giue thee grace to doe it faithfully.” She also advises

---

49 John Norris, 1657-1711, *Spiritual Counsel, Or, the Father’s Advice to His Children* (London: Printed for S. Manship…, 1694), 8-9, 13-14, 23-24, 76-77.
her children to pray in the morning as soon as they can, to avoid the corrupting influences of the world, and, as Norris advised, they ought to read Scripture “to strengthen thy faith.” Thus, children were to be praying constantly, recognize their sinful nature and need of God, reading Scripture themselves, and praying to God reverently and humbly. It is when they were writing on the subject of religion that these mothers assume their most authoritative voice, writing as teachers and urging their children and other readers to live godly lives.

Conclusion

How did children receive their mothers’ teachings? Of course, this would vary according to innumerable factors; however, one daughter, at least, has provided her reflections on her mother’s education. Lady Anne Halkett, b. 1623, wrote,

But my mother’s greatest care, and for which I shall ever own to her memory the highest gratitude, was the great care she took that even from our infancy we were instructed never to neglect to begin and end the day with prayer, and orderly every morning to read the Bible… So that for many years together I was seldom or never absent from divine service… where I bless God I had my education and the example of a good mother.

She thanks God for her mother, who provided her with her education and provided her with an example to follow. This is just what we have seen in both mothers’ and fathers’ legacies — mothers were to educate their sons and daughters from an early age, providing them with literacy skills so that they might be capable of having a good relationship with God, as well as teaching other skills necessary to ensure their entrance into Heaven. For daughters, in particular, the mother was to serve a vital role, living in such a way that she can serve as an example to her

---

50 Leigh, The Mothers Blessing, 35-36; Norris, Spiritual Counsel, 9.
daughter so that she might also one day be a godly wife and mother. Through these legacies, which provide not only direct insight into early education, but also indirect glimpses, as these mothers directed their children on how to raise their own sons and daughters, we see what early education in the household consisted of, and what specifically a religious education entailed.

Next, we will see one method of how women writers employed this religious education.

Trespassing into the public sphere still further, these women wrote their own theological treatises on the Christian religion, thereby teaching their contemporaries on the tenets of Christianity.
Chapter Three

“To put women upon thinking”: Religious Prescriptive Writing

“Let this Word of the Lord, which was from the beginning, stop the mouths of all that oppose women’s speaking in the power of the Lord.”

This quote, taken from the first few pages of Margaret Fell’s most famous work, Women’s Speaking Justified (1666-67) demonstrates the kind of authoritative approach that she employed in her writing, which was primarily focused on the subject of religion. The women writers in this chapter are distinct from the works that have been the focus in this study so far, in that they do not grapple with ideas of women’s morality or make apologies – rhetorical or otherwise – for writing on complex theological matters. Margaret Fell, who served as a formative leader of the early Quaker movement, directly trespassed into the public sphere, speaking and writing publicly on matters of theology as she helped to formulate the tenets of the Society of Friends.

Women’s prescriptive writing that was focused on theological matters, such as those by Margaret Fell and Mary Astell, demonstrate how some women in this period, rather than attempting to adhere to those roles that early modern society assigned to them, instead branched out and presented their own preaching for the sake of their religion. Nevertheless, these women do hold some similarities with their contemporaries. For example, both Bathsua Makin and Mary Astell earned their livings through their writing and participated in women’s literary networks. Margaret Fell and Mary Astell each serve as examples of prescriptive authors who were influenced by contemporary ideas surrounding women. They took these ideas still further by

---

1 Margaret Fell, “Women’s Speaking Justified, Proved, and Allowed of by the Scriptures, All Such As Speak by the Spirit and Power of the Lord Jesus. And How Women Were the First That Preached the Tidings of the Resurrection of Jesus, and Were Sent by Christ’s Own Command, Before He Ascended to the Father,” in Women’s Speaking Justified and Other Pamphlets, Jane Donawerth and Rebecca M. Lush, eds. (Toronto: Iter Press, 2018), 159.
assuming that if women were capable of having a more general education, then it follows that they were intellectually capable of writing on theological subjects. Furthermore, women could teach not only their children, but also the broader public, about Christianity. These women both authoritatively addressed theological questions and provided detailed and fully formed works on what they believed being a true Christian meant. As we have seen in previous chapters, there were areas within the prescriptive genre through which women could express their authority, as long as it was within – or seemed to be within – the traditional bounds of the domestic sphere. However, with these works by Astell and Fell, we see two women who were boldly entering into a sphere that was normally reserved for male priests or Protestant pastors.

Within the historiography, Margaret Fell and Mary Astell have both been studied by historians. Fell, especially, has been recognized for her role in forming the Society of Friends. Furthermore, within the community of the Society of Friends, Margaret Fell was certainly not the only woman to have preached, written, or spoken about theological matters. In fact, Michele Denise Ryan has shown that women were very participatory in this religious community, before their gradual marginalization as women’s roles were made separate and members of the community, both male and female, failed to completely adhere to the Quaker doctrine of the Inner Light. Fell’s writing has also been compared to Astell’s, and Judith Rose has found how there seem to have been some Quaker influences on the Anglican Astell’s writing. As for Mary Astell, she has been called the first English feminist by feminist scholars of the 1980s and

---

3 Michele Denise Ryan, “‘No such difference as men would make’: The Ambiguous Position of Quaker Women in Seventeenth-Century England” (San Jose State University, 1992), 3-5.
1990s. However, her work is beginning to be more closely examined and placed within the field of her contemporaries, and is being approached with a less sensationalized view in more recent studies. Teresa Bejan, for instance, examines Astell’s philosophical thinking in writing, appreciating her thinking in its own right while also considering how she was influenced by the ideas of her contemporaries. However, the historiography has not thus far considered how these authors’ works can be placed within the genre of prescriptive literature.

Therefore, this final chapter will examine the writings of both Margaret Fell and Mary Astell, with a particular focus on how earlier prescriptive writings influenced each author’s arguments but also how each woman writer took these ideas still further and assumed full authority in their theological writing. In both Fell’s *Women’s Speaking Justified* and Astell’s *The Christian Religion* (1705), there are marked similarities to the prescriptive genre in subject and structure. However, each woman writer can be considered a progression from earlier works that have been examined, as they both wrote more directly on theological topics that had been exclusive to male authors’ writing. While legacy writers were focused on education and religious instruction by virtue of their role as mothers, the authors in this chapter assume by virtue of their own education and religious beliefs, that they are not only capable of writing on such religious topics, but that they are within their rights to do so. Thus, the writing that will be examined in this chapter assumes a more direct confidence that has not yet been seen in this study as these women were not grappling with their moral status as women, but as Christians. This chapter will proceed chronologically, beginning with Margaret Fell and returning briefly to Bathsua Makin.

---


Teresa M. Bejan, “’Since All the World is mad, why should not I be so?’ Mary Astell on Equality, Hierarchy, and Ambition,” *Political Theory* 47, no. 6 (2019), 781-808.
before proceeding to Mary Astell’s early eighteenth-century treatise. Makin’s work, which was published only seven years after Fell’s, is helpful to consider in this chapter for similarities to Astell and her own particular focus women’s education. Thus it will be shown how these early modern women inserted their authority into their didactic works, teaching and speaking publicly on theological issues.

The Society of Friends and Margaret Fell’s Women’s Speaking Justified (1666-67)

The Society of Friends held that every believer was equal, regardless of sex, as each believer had what was termed an “Inner Light” within them and was therefore being guided by the Holy Spirit. Margaret Fell was a formative leader of this movement, alongside her second husband, George Fox. Fox, born in 1624 in Leicestershire, was the son of a church warden, and his parents had intended for him to go into ministry. When he was nineteen, Fox left his home in pursuit of religious enlightenment, having become disillusioned after meeting Puritans whose professed religious beliefs differed strongly from their actual behavior. Over the course of this spiritual quest, Fox developed Quakerism, and in 1647 he began to preach his newfound beliefs publicly. Of primary importance was reading of the Bible, similar to many English Protestants in this period; this religious sect was very much a product of the times, due to its similar beliefs to other contemporary movements. For instance, Quakers believed, along with many other Protestants, that the Second Coming was soon to occur – an understandable belief given the chaos of recent events such as the Civil War. 

---

However, the Society’s belief in the Inner Light made them distinct from other groups. Within Quaker theology, the Second Coming was already in progress, as the Inner Light signified Christ’s presence on earth within the hearts of his believers. The Inner Light within Quaker theology was a Christ-centered guiding force that helped believers “to understand the Bible” by “speaking scripture directly to them, and commanding them to obey his requests rather than the laws of their government… or the Anglican church.” Indeed, the refusal to take oaths of loyalty to any governing body often got Quakers into trouble. While they accepted the “earthly authority” of governing bodies, they did not believe in social hierarchies of any kind since they viewed everyone as equal. Fell, centrally involved in developing these theological beliefs, was herself arrested for her refusal to swear an oath of loyalty to the king, and when she wrote to him, she addressed him in the informal form of “thee.” The Society of Friends was a radical movement for this period, as they allowed women to preach publicly, refused to use titles or show other common forms of showing respect and refused to attend Anglican services. 9

Fell played an important role in developing these beliefs and helped to establish women’s more empowered and prominent roles in the Society through her writing of pamphlets such as Women’s Speaking Justified (1666).10 Her estate, Swarthmore Hall, became the center of the movement, as it was used to hold Meetings; Fell herself was an organizer for the community, often being referred to by names such as the “nursing mother” of the movement as she kept fellow Quakers informed through correspondence, oversaw the printing of defenses of the religion and letters for unity within the sect, as well as helping to develop theological beliefs on topics such as women’s roles, marriage, Women’s Meetings, and general Quaker theology.11

---

10 Ibid., 1.
Fell was born in 1614 to a well-to-do family in Lancashire and in 1632, she married Thomas Fell, a barrister, MP, and judge. Together the couple had nine children, eight growing to adulthood.\(^{12}\) Fell was exposed to Quakerism and converted to the religion in 1652, along with her children and a number of their servants; interestingly, this happened while Thomas Fell was away in London and while he never converted to Quakerism himself, he supported his wife’s beliefs and allowed her to use the home for religious meetings. After her husband died in 1658, Fell went to London to petition the king to release Quakers who had been imprisoned for their beliefs, becoming even more active in the Quaker community in this way.\(^{13}\) Fell herself was imprisoned on three separate occasions, for a cumulative total of about six years. In 1669, she married George Fox, although the majority of their 22-year marriage was spent apart as each of them worked to promote the faith; in fact, the longest time they spent together was 21 months, while Fox was recuperating at Swarthmore Hall, Fell’s estate, from illness likely caused after his long imprisonment for his beliefs. Margaret Fell continued to be an active and influencing member of the Society of Friends late in her life and continued to travel for the purposes of activities – her last trip to London took place when she was 83. While her influence and popularity did dwindle, her children published her writings after her death in April 1702.\(^{14}\)

One of Fell’s pamphlets, in particular, argues that women were fully capable of preaching and teaching religion, refuting contemporary ideas of women’s inferiority that was examined in the first chapter of this study. The title of this pamphlet in its entirety is as follows: \textit{Women’s Speaking Justified, Proved, and Allowed of by the Scriptures, All Such As Speak by the Spirit and}


\(^{13}\) Margaret Fell, \textit{A Relation of Margaret Fell, Her Birth, Life, Testimony, and Sufferings for the Lord’s Everlasting Truth in Her Generation}, in \textit{Women’s Speaking Justified and Other Pamphlets}, Jane Donawerth and Rebecca M. Lush, eds. (Toronto: Iter, 2018), 56-58.

Power of the Lord Jesus. And How Women Were the First That Preached the Tidings of the Resurrection of Jesus, and Were Sent by Christ’s Own Command, Before He Ascended to the Father. Even from the title, we can already get a sense of Fell’s purpose in writing to contest notions of women’s inferiority within church hierarchy. Rather than apologizing for writing publicly, Fell was arguing that women should be able to speak and teach on religious matters outright, a markedly different argument than her contemporaries who apologized for writing publicly. Her arguments primarily draw on the point that God Himself acknowledged the abilities of women and Jesus used their speaking for the purposes of his church. This then, would shut down any opposing arguments, since God is the ultimate authority, and Fell frequently addressed these potential dissenters directly in her pamphlet. Much in the same way as women writers such as “Jane Anger” and Rachel Speght, Fell used Scripture in her argument, thereby demonstrating her deep knowledge of the Bible as well as drawing on theological arguments. Fell examines not only the creation story but also the arguments of the Apostle Paul in regards to women’s status and speaking in church, which were in this period commonly used as a justification to prevent women speaking and preaching in church.15 Throughout all of these arguments, we see Fell’s skilled and confident arguments on these theological topics. She was living out the religious beliefs within her religious sect, that women are spiritually equal to men, intellectually capable of theological reasoning, and that women are entitled to speak on these religious beliefs just as men are.

Fell begins very directly, arguing that Paul’s remarks have been misinterpreted and that “God himself hath manifested his will and mind concerning women, and unto women.”16 This is

16 Fell, Women’s Speaking Justified, 157.
similar to the rhetorical beginnings of other writings such as Rachel Speght’s and Dorothy Leigh’s, who drew on Scripture to justify and support her arguments for women’s intellectual abilities and authority in writing, respectively. Fell’s writing, however, is distinct due to her belief that women were spiritually equal and entitled to write on religious matters. Consequently, the only “justification” she provides was to argue that her contemporaries have misunderstood Paul’s words that women should keep silent. While writers such as Speght focused on these same passages to argue for women’s spiritual – but not earthly – equality, Fell was arguing for full spiritual equality in this world and the next. She is therefore fully entitled to speak publicly on religious matters.

Another example of similarities between Fell’s writing and the writing of her contemporaries is her contestation of the idea that women were inferior to men, based on a flawed – in their minds – interpretation of the creation story. She argues that in Genesis 1:27-29, God created men and women both in his own image, making “no such distinctions and differences as men do.” It was men – not God – who had created these gender differences. According to God’s order of creation, men and women were created equal, since they were both made in his image. It follows then, that because these distinctions are from men and not according to God’s plans, the perceived differences can now be disregarded. Fell continues, her words becoming even more forceful:

Let this Word of the Lord, which was from the beginning, stop the mouths of all that oppose women’s speaking in the power of the Lord. For he hath put enmity between the woman and the Serpent, and if the seed of the woman speak not, the seed of the Serpent speaks; for God hath put enmity between the two seeds, and it is manifest that those that speak against the woman, and her seed’s speaking, speak out of the envy of the old Serpent’s seed.  

\[17\] Ibid., 157, 159.
Here, Fell has made it a matter of urgency that women speak – if they do not, then it is the Devil who will have more influence in the world. For further clarification, it is important to note that the “seed” of the woman that Fell is referencing ultimately carries on to Jesus Christ, who of course was born of a woman.\(^{18}\) Furthermore, those who are opposed to women’s speaking are denying the work of the Lord, since the women who would speak are doing so “in the power of the Lord.” Women have the God-given authority to speak or preach for God, and God is using them and working through them to struggle against the Serpent, or the Devil.

Fell also drew on the prominent idea that the collective body of the church was often personified and referred to as a woman, the bride of Christ, drawing on numerous verses from the Bible. Fell uses these examples to argue that those who speak against “this woman’s speaking speak against the Church of Christ and the seed of the woman, which is the seed of Christ,” and that speaking against “the Spirit of the Lord speaking in a woman, simply by reason of her sex or because she is a woman,” thereby disregarding how God is speaking through her, “speak against Christ and his Church.\(^{19}\) By inextricably combining the woman with the Spirit or power of God, to speak against the woman means to speak against God. This is a more practical application of the Quaker belief that within every Christian is an Inner Light, the Spirit of God, that leads people to Him. Thus, Fell is here using a tenet of her religious sect to further her argument that women can also be used by God in this way.

The next section of *Women’s Speaking Justified* employs the examples of specific women from the Bible to justify not only women’s spiritual insights, but also Jesus’s acknowledgement of these insights, as well as his use of them and their speaking to provide religious wisdom. The first example Fell uses is the story of the woman who washed Jesus’s feet. While the disciples

\(^{18}\) Ibid., 160.

\(^{19}\) Ibid., 159-160.
were “filled with indignation against her,” the fact that she came to Jesus with a precious box of ointment and knew to show him such deference demonstrates that “this woman knew more of the secret Power and Wisdom of God than his disciples did.” This woman was in this moment more filled with the wisdom of God, the “Inner Light” than even the disciples of Jesus, the men who were closest to him. And in this instance, God – through the “Inner Light” within the woman – preferred to use a woman to show the proper deference that was owed to Jesus rather than the disciples, who were all men. Jesus himself also used women for his purposes when he used Mary Magdalene and the other women with her to give the message about his resurrection, which serves as Fell’s next example to further her argument. Without this message, Fell points out, the salvation of mankind would have been put in jeopardy, since these women were giving news of Jesus’s resurrection, upon which the whole of the gospel depends. Thus women’s speaking played a crucial role in the Bible and Jesus himself used women’s speaking to his work for the salvation of mankind.

Finally, Fell addresses Paul’s remarks on the topic of women speaking, which have long been used to support arguments that women should keep silent. An example of these arguments can be seen within Allestree’s the Ladies Calling, when he wrote that the Paul was writing on this topic based on the inferiority of women “in regard of the creation and the first sin,” as well as the assumption that women needed instruction, for which silence has always been considered an “indispensable qualification.” The verses in question are 1 Timothy 2:12-15 (that women should not teach or have authority over men and that she should rather stay silent) and 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 (that women should keep silent and ask their husbands at home if they want to learn, since it is shameful for a woman to speak in church).

20 Ibid., 161-163.
21 Allestree, the Ladies Calling in the Whole Duty of Man, 6.
Fell’s argument relevant to these verses is, however, that Paul’s admonishments did not apply to all women; rather, Paul was writing in regard to those women who “were in confusion” and it was they who should keep silent. The women who were ordered to keep silent were those “under the law, and in that transgression as Eve was, and such as were to learn, and not to speak publicly.” It was women who were being punished and had done something wrong that were the ones who should be kept silent. Fell also references 1 Corinthians 14:27-28, in which men are ordered to keep silent if they do not understand and are without an interpreter; if there is confusion, in other words, it is better to keep silent. According to Fell, this example demonstrates that it is not only women who were ordered to keep silent in certain situations; therefore, it depends more on the wisdom and knowledge of the speaker, and if they find themselves lacking in these things, they should not speak and risk misleading their fellow Christians. Capable men and women who had not transgressed in some way, however, could and should preach in church.

To apply these verses to all women instead of the “undecent and unreverent women” that Paul was addressing in these verses was to twist his words and corrupt the intent that he had behind them. Therefore, those who opposed women’s speaking were, according to Fell, not of a godly opinion but rather came from the “bottomless pit” and were resisting the power of the Lord, which dwelled in these women, that would preach to Christians and lead them to God.22 Women, just like men, were guided by the Inner Light of Christ and so were capable of preaching and leading fellow Christians. To prevent women from doing so was to prevent the purposes of God.

---

22 Fell, *Women’s Speaking Justified*, 164, 166.
Influences on Astell’s Writing

Seventeenth century works by prescriptive authors had great influence on Mary Astell’s writing, who defended women’s intellectual abilities in addition to defining her Christian beliefs. For instance, authors that were examined in previous chapters such as Bathsua Makin, Rachel Speght, and Dorothy Leigh, among others, established this field of women’s writing that then opened the door for writers such as Mary Astell to publish works of theology. The similarities between Bathsua Makin and Astell, especially, are striking: both women wrote to earn their living, argued for the sake of women’s education, and were involved in women’s literary networks. Women writers who drew on Scripture to establish a more positive view of women’s morality, intellectual ability and religious thinking then made it more acceptable for authors such as Astell to step into the foray and write her religious treatise that examines Christian religion and defines her religious beliefs. At the time of Astell’s writing, there had long been a literary debate in the English *querelle des femmes* over the course of the seventeenth century. Furthermore, religious upheaval in this period also saw women becoming more involved in theological debates, and as women defined their own beliefs, they also sought to persuade others to adhere to their particular form of Christianity.23 This was certainly the case with Margaret Fell, and we will see how Mary Astell also was showcasing the Anglican religion and the perfection of Christianity.

One prescriptive work, in particular, was more directly influential on Mary Astell’s writing. Richard Allestree’s *The Whole Duty of Man*, first published in 1657, aimed to be a comprehensive guide to both men and women, in sections titled *the Gentlemans Calling* and *the Ladies Calling*. Richard Allestree (1619-1681) was educated at Oxford, served both Charles I

---

and II in intelligence, was captured by Parliamentary forces in 1641, and was made a canon of Christ Church after the Restoration. He spent the rest of his career as an administrator for Eton and Christ Church.  

While scholars now generally believe this work to be Allestree’s, there was some uncertainty in terms of authorship and Astell herself believed the work to be that of Lady Dorothy Coventry.  Nevertheless, the ideas that Astell was responding to in Allestree’s work were highly influential to her own.

Allestree focused on the role of women and women’s intellectual abilities in his section “the Ladies Calling,” the purpose of which was to “rescue the whole Sex,” from the negative views that had been written about women since many earlier authors had made “every woman so far an Eve,” and that her faults and “depravation” meant that all womankind was forfeit. Allestree was refuting the idea that just because there were “foolish and scandalous women” that there was no other kind of woman. Much like his contemporaries and fellow women writers in the prescriptive genre, he defended women against the bad example of Eve, recognizing the negative view of women that had been established. He considered his work a charity to women, to show them their own value and to provide them with better thoughts of themselves, “which God and Nature have no more percluded the Feminine, then the Masculine part of mankind.” This more positive view is in keeping with the arguments of Speght and Sowernam, that women were created by God and were spiritually equal to men. Similar to Makin, While Allestree did hold that women were “naturally inferior to men,” he did also recognize that men were improved

by their educations and that women would likely be just as improved by education as men if they were given the same advantage.  

Allestree’s work also defined differences between men and women and the various advantages associated with each gender. For women, he believed that they were inherently more inclined towards virtue than men, who had to deal with more responsibilities out in the world; therefore, women should thank God that they were not men for these reasons. The work is similar to conduct books of the period that were examined in chapter 1, in that it defines the woman’s roles in terms of her marital status (virgin, wife, widow) and has the tendency to focus on particular virtues that women ought to cultivate. However, it is also clear that Allestree shared a view similar to Makin’s that women were intellectually capable, a view that would have endeared him to Astell, who referenced his work within her own.

**Astell’s *The Christian Religion* (1705)**

Astell’s *The Christian Religion* (1705) is striking for how she philosophically reasoned for the truth of the Bible and the infallibility of the Christian religion, as well as women's intellectual abilities to reason with these topics independently. Her writing, by speaking more directly on matters of theology, is less focused on defending women’s morality as it assumes that women are intellectually capable and entitled to consider matters of religion. Throughout *The Christian Religion*, we can see evidence of Astell’s education and her involvement in an intellectual network of women, much as we saw in Makin’s *The Ancient Education of Gentlewomen* (1673). Astell's argument that women should not be kept ignorant, as well as her

---


logical reasoning of the truth of the Bible, demonstrates her confidence in her own intellectual capabilities.

Mary Astell was born in 1666 to a fairly well-to-do family and grew up as the daughter of a respected gentleman; she was educated as such, and perhaps was taught more than the average young girl of her status, since she was taught alongside her brother by their uncle, a clergyman. By 1684, however, both her parents and her uncle were dead, leaving Astell an impoverished orphan who had to fend for herself. Astell decided that she wanted to be an author and moved to London to accomplish this goal; once there, she received help from the archbishop of Canterbury and was later supported by a network of wealthy gentlewomen, her closest relationship being to Lady Catherine Jones, daughter of the first earl of Ranelagh and most likely the addressee of The Christian Religion. Astell enjoyed a successful literary career, and The Christian Religion was published at the height of her popularity. Her work was admired both by leading literary figures as well religious writers and other women authors of the time. Finally, Astell was defending the Anglican Church in addition to women’s intellectual abilities. Tensions in the late seventeenth century, due to the close similarities of the Church of England to the Catholic church caused political controversy, which led to many authors, not just Astell, to write prescriptive texts for women that provided instruction on how to pray and conduct themselves in church. Much in the same way as Elizabeth Richardson’s legacy that included such an extensive collection of prayers for every occasion, these texts tended to provide this instruction for women who were part of the Church of England, as Astell was, in a conservative manner that aimed to control thought and action.

---

Nevertheless, *The Christian Religion* is striking for how it departs from this tradition of conservative obedience. Similar to Makin’s text, Astell’s work culminates with an argument for women’s education. After establishing the truth of Christianity, Astell proceeds to defend the idea of women’s intellectual abilities and how these abilities would be better employed in intellectual pursuits. While Makin did believe that women were inferior to men and that they should not speak publicly, Astell focuses more on women’s private intellectual and spiritual devotion, calling for women to decide for themselves what they believe and to not obey men without question. Astell employs a philosophical framework to proceed through her arguments logically, in a similar exercise to Anna Maria van Schurman’s writing. This is demonstrated when she argues that the Bible, both Old and New Testaments mutually prove each other, and how, after considering for herself and examining the text of the Bible, she finds nothing that offends her reason. Her purpose in writing is defined in the advertisement: “To put women upon thinking,” to examine their principles, motives, and grounds of their belief and practice; in short, to make their religion “their own.”

In encouraging this deep religious examination of their own beliefs, women were here being called to depart from religious instruction that they might receive from men such as priests or their fathers and husbands, and to decide for themselves what they believe. The study of religion for women had long been deemed an appropriate pastime and had been prescribed to women in the texts such as the mother’s legacies of the previous chapter. However, for Astell, she takes this individual study of Scripture still further, by instructing women to disregard the instruction of those around them to make their religion their own. In this way, women would

---

have a true relationship with God instead of merely being told what to believe by the men in her life.

Rather than spend so much time trying to convince those who were already inclined to reject any opinion that differed from their own, Astell instead prioritized those who were willing to listen to her arguments, in the hope that at least some would accept her arguments. Having made this disclaimer that her writing was merely her own thoughts, Astell further supported this expectation of objections to her writing by arguing that everyone must decide for themselves and that it is in fact one’s right to do so. If one was to try to force or coerce anyone to believe a certain way and assuming that God has not called them to a position of authority, this is an “assuming of His prerogative, and an usurpation upon their just and natural rights, who have as much right to abound in their own sense as we have to abound in ours.” Only God can command, and it is an inherent right to define one’s own beliefs. Once one has decided what one believes, they “ought to stick to it with a heroic constancy and immovable resolution; which is a valor that does not misbecome a woman.” 32 Astell calls her fellow women to strongly defend their own—rationalized and self-examined—beliefs, not submitting to anyone but God. While Makin pointed to the purpose of women’s education as for the glory of God, Astell radically departs from this purpose by arguing that women should not submit to anyone in their religious beliefs. Rather than a spiritual education for the purpose of better serving others, Astell calls for a spiritual education that drew one personally closer to God.

Mary Astell anticipated that there would be resistance to her arguments. Rather than being pulled into the debate over Eve and women’s status that we have seen so many previous authors grapple with, Astell writes that “If God had not intended that women should use their

reason, He would not have given them any”; God does nothing without purpose and because women were created with rational thought, women ought to use it for “the noblest objects,” such as religion. Similar to her contemporaries, Astell employed Scripture to support these points, although she used different verses than we have yet seen, which were not focused on gender. She argues that women can serve God better and “‘love Him with all her mind and soul,’ as well as ‘with all her heart and strength’” if they have firmly established religious beliefs. 33 These are references to Bible verses (Mark 12:30, or Matthew 22:37, for instance) that call on Christians to love and serve God completely. Just as Margaret Fell argued that to deny women’s preaching was to deny how God was using her for his purposes, Astell was arguing that to deny women the right to practice their own clarified religion was to prevent what God had called them to.

A more radical departure from women’s writing that we have seen thus far is Astell’s aggressive stance on how to defend one’s beliefs once they have been formed. First, she argues that one should not change from their beliefs once they have been defined, even adopting combative language. Anticipating that her contemporaries might view this aggressive stance as inappropriate for women, she argues that this more aggressive behavior is not “misbecoming” because it is in an effort to protect their God-given beliefs. Women are to submit to God alone. However, anticipating that men would still try to coerce women to adhere to their own religious beliefs, Astell prescribes that women should be loyal only to God, not to the teaching of any man. Indeed, Astell was so loyal to her beliefs that she compared it to be something as inherent as the need to eat, and she scorns the “learned and witty” men who write with much “art and flourish” as he tells her what her own needs are.34

33 Ibid., 51.
34 Ibid., 50, 68.
Astell continues to describe how to resist the religious teaching of men in positions of authority, pointing out that men posed a corrupting risk to women as he “seek to ruin her in this world as in the next.” She advises against blind submission to men who present themselves as wise and authoritative because they had put themselves in those positions over women, not God. Therefore, women need only to follow God. Astell’s arguments arise from the religious tensions of her time, which could easily cause one to feel confused and be vulnerable to being led astray from what Astell viewed as the true religion. To achieve clarity, one need only follow the “light which God Himself has set up in my mind to lead me to Him,” the “light in my mind” which directs one to God.35

After having established the purpose of defining one’s own religion, the second part of *The Christian Religion* is more practical, providing guidance on how to live out one’s religion in everyday life. Astell shows particular concern for women’s role in society and how women’s potential often went ignored. Returning to her unusually combative views, Astell argued that women were not stepping outside the bounds of their sex when they adopted an aggressive approach to protect their beliefs. Once again using Bible verses separated from gender, she writes that a woman can

> ‘put on the whole armor of God’ without degenerating into a masculine temper; she may ‘take the shield of faith,’ ‘the sword of the spirit,’ ‘the helmet of salvation,’ and ‘the breast-plate of righteousness’ without any offense to the men, and they become her as well as they do the greatest hero. I could never understand why we are bred cowards; sure it can never be because our masters are afraid we should rebel, for courage would enable us to endure their injuries, to forgive, and to despise them!36

Similar to Makin, Astell argues that women were educated to be weaker; however, women do not need to remain so. Furthermore, she argues that women adopting this armor of God are not

---

35 Ibid., 51, 54, 68-70.
36 Ibid., 104-105.
threatening to men; however, women have the potential to be just as heroic as men. In Astell’s mind, as well as in Margaret Fell’s, women and men have equal potential to do heroic acts for God. Because women are prevented from reaching this potential, however, society is stopping them from possibly becoming even greater than men in this respect, as Astell slyly insinuates when she writes that surely it could not be because women could overcome their masters.

Education having clearly been a major part of her own life, Astell considered the subjects that women were allowed to – as well as those that they were prevented from – studying. Men, she writes, are the ones who determine what women can and cannot study and this is why the subjects that women were allowed were actually for the benefit of men: “Some men say that heraldry is a pretty study for a woman, for this reason, I suppose, that she may know how to blazon her lord and master’s great achievements! They allow us poetry, plays, and romances, to divert us and themselves.”37 Perceiving the purpose of education as a benefit for others, as Makin did, Astell argues that this is to the detriment of women and prevents them from meeting their full potential.

As we have seen, prescriptive literature often considered historical figures that might serve as virtuous examples for women, as well as men, to follow, such as with Makin’s list of exemplary women and Rachel Speght’s list of notable Biblical women. Astell departs from this tradition, instead pointing out how the study of history and historical figures has also been for men’s entertainment rather than for women’s benefit. In fact, she argues that the entire field of history has been shaped by men who only recorded the acts of great men and ignored those of notable women. Because women are denied any roles in the political sphere, they do not have any use for the study of history, since it has only been men in this field that have been the focus

37 Ibid., 201.
of history, and those women who did act in an exemplary manner, are thought to have the spirit of a man!38 Thus these cases cannot serve as examples to women, since they are presented as outside of their reach. Astell’s focus here demonstrates how women’s education relegated them to their domestic roles, focusing on the purpose of their education and their moral and domestic duties. Much as Hannah Woolley lamented the lack of women’s full and formal educations when she complained of how parents send their incapable sons off to school while the intelligent daughter remained at home, Astell complained of the content of education that so favored the male sex.39 In contesting women’s education in this way, Astell was departing from the arguments of her contemporaries.

Nevertheless, Astell did in some sense adhere to the roles that were assigned to women in this period. Rather than completely call for women’s ability to preach and teach on religion, as Fell did, Astell writes that with the exception of their Christian calling, women still had contemplative, passive roles at home. Most similarly to Makin’s arguments, Astell recommends a broader education that was still primarily focused on religion. For instance, she argued that because women do not have the active roles that men enjoyed, they should pursue intellectual subjects such as science.40 Astell would likely have agreed with Makin and van Schurman in their idea that it was appropriate for women to pursue academic study as long as she did not shirk her domestic duties.

In both Margaret Fell’s and Mary Astell’s writing, we see how these women writers both followed the literary traditions of their contemporaries and departed from them in some ways as they argued for women’s religious autonomy. The subject of religion had long been considered

38 Ibid., 201-202.
40 Astell, The Christian Religion, 204-205.
appropriate for women to study, and we can see that early modern women were extensively well-versed in Scripture as writers such as Rachel Speght, Ester Sowernam, Dorothy Leigh, Elizabeth Joscelin, and Elizabeth Richardson all employed Scripture in their treatises that focused on women’s moral education. However, Fell and Astell took this model of education still further, by arguing that women need only submit to God in their pursuit of a deeper and more personal religion. Herself a leader of a religious movement, Margaret Fell stepped outside of the assigned roles for women in this period the most out of all these writers, although she was not unique in this instance.

**Conclusion**

In a post-Reformation England, which emphasized the individual’s personal relationship with God, women could more easily make the case for their abilities in this field, especially since they had already been assigned the role as early religious teacher for their children and were expected to have a private relationship with God. Furthermore, while the Society of Friends was not the only Protestant sect that held that women were spiritually equal to men, it was the sect that allowed women to actually preach publicly within the church, a theological tenet that Margaret Fell helped to define and took full advantage of in her central position as a formative member of the movement. Mary Astell likewise departed from her contemporaries’ focus on women’s morality by arguing that women were fully capable of educating themselves and forming their own religious beliefs. These two works are defining examples of the authority that women were exercising when they wrote on religious matters and more directly addressed the role of women in the church and in society in general.
Furthermore, this more authoritative writing was at this point more acceptable for women on religious subjects, as the majority of women’s education in this period was self-taught and more and more women writers were published.\textsuperscript{41} Thus, by the time of the mid to late seventeenth century, when women began to pursue literary careers, women-authored texts had already been well-established.\textsuperscript{42} These factors, combined with men such as George Fox and Richard Allestree, who held more positive views of women that were no doubt shaped by the views of their literary predecessors such as Agrippa, Vives, and Elyot, only helped in further encouraging women’s education and professional ventures in the field of education through prescriptive writing. While Fox and Allestree did hold that there were differences between the genders in terms of ability, they also recognized women’s abilities in studying religion, thereby encouraging works such as \textit{Women’s Speaking Justified} and \textit{The Christian Religion}.

Mary Astell and Margaret Fell were not unique in their more aggressively outspoken stances on women’s roles, nor were they last of their kind. For instance, historians have studied numerous other women who were part of the Society of Friends and preached publicly on their beliefs.\textsuperscript{43} And, as we shall see, women writers of the eighteenth century took these arguments still further by arguing that women could be equal to men not just spiritually, but also more immediately on the earthly side of creation, culminating in the writing of Mary Wollstonecraft.

\textsuperscript{43} Rose, “Prophesying Daughters,” 93-110.
Conclusion

The Eighteenth-Century Perspective: Mary Wollstonecraft and *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787)

In many ways, the writing of Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797), an eighteenth-century author who has been hailed for her feminist views, is the culmination of the progression of early modern women’s education in the prescriptive genre. Her 1792 treatise, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, boldly claimed that women were men’s intellectual equals, and should therefore have the same rights as men. Her first treatise, especially, can be seen as within the genre of prescriptive literature, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787). The work is similar to the conduct books that were so popular in this period, and Wollstonecraft continued this tradition by focusing on girls’ education and women’s domestic duties. It follows the general structure of an early modern conduct book, covering on specific topics such as dress, marriage, fine arts, treatment of servants, and childcare; however, Wollstonecraft drew on this structure to serve her own more radical ends.¹

Mary Wollstonecraft has been called the most scandalous woman of her generation, for her writing which trespassed into male topics such as political theory, her views on virtue and morality, as well as her personal life and remarks on marriage.² She was deemed scandalous for her love affair, having a child out of wedlock, being rejected, and twice attempting suicide before marrying William Godwin, who shared similar views to her own on the subject of marriage and encouraged her independence. The prospect of the happiness of this relationship was cut short by her death in childbirth five months after their wedding. After her death, Godwin wrote frankly and honestly about his wife’s life in his biography of Wollstonecraft, leading to her notoriety

amongst their contemporaries that would last for many years after her death. 3 Through his writing and other historical evidence, we know that Wollstonecraft was born to a middle-class family of English and Irish ancestry in London, and she left home at the age of 19 in order to pursue an occupation as a lady’s companion; she later worked in various positions as a schoolteacher, private governess, and a writer, editor, and translator for London printer Joseph Johnson. 4 She had to move on from her efforts to establish a school with her sisters when it proved unsuccessful and became a source of financial difficulty. In her work as a governess, Wollstonecraft both disliked her position and was disliked by her employer, Lady Kingsborough; it was after her dismissal from this position that Wollstonecraft began her career as a writer. 5

In her writing, Wollstonecraft “did not plead like a woman on behalf of her sex. She did not appeal to the feelings of her readers. She reasoned with them, like a man, that is, a rational creature.” And she was highly critical of her own sex — she wanted women to be rational and independent people, whose sense of value came from themselves and from their self-control, and she drew on the example of an ideal, rational man who was educated to use his reason as the model to follow. Wollstonecraft wanted women to be properly educated to use their reason so that they might accomplish the prescribed duties to themselves and to others. Interestingly, in the process of her arguments, Wollstonecraft was often rather critical of women: she did not, for instance, defend the accusations against women that we have seen writers such as Makin and Speght responding to. Instead, Wollstonecraft tended to actually add to the accusations that were commonly argued by misogynists; nevertheless, Wollstonecraft does present an ideal of the ideal

---

5 Tomaselli, “Introduction,” xiii, xv.
woman and provide an understanding the hindrances that often prevented women from reaching this ideal.6

These ideas are presented in her works such as Thoughts on the Education of Daughters (1787), which was written after the closure of the school Wollstonecraft failed to keep open and before her work as a governess. This particular treatise has been placed within the tradition of didactic educational literature.7 Wollstonecraft’s focus in her first published treatise is more exclusively on education with the aim to help women to become more rational, and Vivien Jones has demonstrated how much Wollstonecraft’s works are in keeping with advice literature and educational treatises.8 I will not reiterate Jones’s arguments here, however, it worth briefly examining Wollstonecraft’s writing in order to demonstrate how the trends contained in her work is in keeping with this long prescriptive literary tradition focused on the question of women’s status, morality, and education that has been the focus of this study.

My thesis has endeavored to demonstrate the role of the prescriptive genre in early modern education. An arena of debate that both reflected and shaped early modern English society, this literary genre can be used as a lens to examine contemporary views on education and gender roles more broadly. In taking a roughly chronological approach, we can trace changes over time in regard to early modern women’s education. Beginning with a focus on sixteenth and seventeenth century works, we can see how earlier ideas about women’s inherent inferiority — both intellectual and moral — presented a rational behind women’s exclusively moral education as a means by which to “fix” women’s natural faults. Both sides of the debate drew on the

---

6 Ibid., xi-xii, xxvi, xxviii.
example of Eve from Scripture to argue for women’s inferiority as well as women’s more equal status with men; in both of these viewpoints, the focus is on the question of women’s moral character, and the extent to which she should be educated in the wake of the humanist and Reformation movements. The arguments used in such works as Bathsua Makin’s and Rachel Speght’s likewise focus on Scripture and the figure of Eve. They argue that women should be given a moral education focused on Biblical virtues, not because women need to be fixed, but rather because this will help them to be better companions to their husbands and mothers equipped to educate their children and servants. In this way, women would positively shape society through their morality.

Next, focusing in on a particular subgenre of prescriptive literature, parents’ legacy writings provide yet another lens through which to explore early modern views on education. Mother’s legacies, especially, demonstrate one of the few instances in which women could exercise more direct authority, albeit in an acceptable position over their children and on the appropriate topic of religion. Nevertheless, this acceptable authority was strategically employed by some of these mothers in order to write publicly on how she wanted her children to be educated. Elizabeth Joscelin’s treatise, while not intended for publishing, nevertheless is worth examining for how she even went so far as to give instruction to her husband on how she wanted their child to be raised. These mothers’ legacies are compared to fathers’ legacies in order to get a richer understanding of how mothers were more exclusively focused on religious education for their children — an acceptable subject — while fathers could cover this and other topics, such as how to manage an estate. Thus, we see how mothers were relegated to a more limited role as educator, yet they exercised this authority to its fullest extent by authoritatively instructing their children on how to live a good Christian life.
Finally, the genre of prescriptive literature in works published in the late seventeenth century demonstrate the fullest extent of women authoritatively arguing for women’s status and education that we have yet seen. The works of the previous chapters have seen women employing rhetorical apologies for their writing and maintaining a focus on those subjects that were deemed appropriate for women to write on. However, women such as Margaret Fell and Mary Astell present two examples of didactic works by women that make no such apology. Rather, these women unapologetically wrote on complex theological matters. While still within the field of religion, these women were acting as religious instructors, a role that was not traditionally open for women in early modern society. Fell, especially, served as an outright spiritual leader for the Society of Friends, and her pamphlets demonstrate the authority that she enjoyed. Thus, we have seen a progress through this time period of women gradually exercising more and more authority in their writing, as well as moving from an exclusive focus on women’s morality, to a broadening focus on women’s more general education that was not limited to fixing their inherent moral faults. Fell and Astell present examples of how this broader education could be employed by women to write these more general treatises on topics that had previously been reserved exclusively for men.

Wollstonecraft was, in many ways, a radical extension of this genre. *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* broadly follows the early modern English conduct book structure, focusing on such subjects as dress, reading, love, marriage, and morals; however, Wollstonecraft was “appropriating the genre of conduct literature for the transmission of feminist opinions.”

For instance, one of the reasons Wollstonecraft gives for cultivating reason and a robust education is that it is necessary to “render a woman contented; and in a miserable [situation], it is

---

her only consolation.” The “miserable situation” Wollstonecraft means is an unhappy marriage, and it is only through her reading and education that a woman could find her only respite and escape from the unhappiness caused by a union with a “fool or a brute.” Education, in Wollstonecraft’s mind, is empowering and allows for women to make sense of their circumstances.

At the same time, we do see Wollstonecraft, in a similar manner to her predecessors, simultaneously adhere to societal norms and expectations for women. For instance, she assigns every manner of domestic concern as “properly a woman’s province,” and focuses on piety and moral duty throughout her treatise. Therefore, in both structure and content, there is no small resemblance to the traditions established in earlier didactic writings, and in her numerous responses to particular treatises, such as Rousseau’s Émile, we still see these networks of literary debate. However, Wollstonecraft was also forging her own path, and continuing on from what predecessors such as Margaret Fell and Mary Astell had argued for women’s education. She makes no apology for her writing, and directly states her opinions, which she feels are a real contribution: “It is true, many treatises have already been written; yet it occurred to me, that much still remained to be said. I shall not swell these sheets by writing apologies for my attempt.”

In A Vindication of the Rights of Women, Wollstonecraft takes this directness even further, and was “trespassing on the domain of political theory reserved for male authors.” Rather critical of women in this treatise, Wollstonecraft highlighted the gender gap and the need for a more universal education if women were to ever become useful citizens rather than simply

---

11 Wollstonecraft, Thoughts on the Education of Daughters, 3, 104, 27.
an “affectionate wife and rational mother.” Once again focused on the relationship of education and virtue, Wollstonecraft was writing for the whole of the human race, not just for the sake of women. Women’s education is for the improvement of the whole of society — “If children are to be educated to understand the true principle of patriotism, their mother must be a patriot.” While the purpose of educating women for the benefit of society is not unfamiliar, Wollstonecraft is taking this idea further than her predecessors, and focusing on how women’s education would allow for them to be useful members of society in their own right instead of the useless members that they are now. In this view, women are not being educated merely to serve others, but rather, they are seen as having the capability for real contributions.

Wollstonecraft can be considered a progression from writings that were examined in the previous chapters for how she in many instances disregards gender in favor of a more exclusive focus on education. She describes the first priority of education is “to obtain a character as a human being, regardless of the distinction of sex.” For Wollstonecraft, virtue and reason, the goals of education, are genderless standards applied to all. We see this gender neutral language in Thoughts as well, when Wollstonecraft writes, “I conceive it to be the duty of every rational creature to attend to its offspring.” The focus is instead on rational behavior, and an education that will instill this and virtues in its students.

Considering these arguments from Wollstonecraft, we can see a progression over the course of the early modern era within this genre of didactic literature. The earlier focus on women’s inherent sinfulness and inferiority, and the consequent need for a moral education, has

---

12 Moore, Mary Wollstonecraft, 34, 39.
14 Wollstonecraft, A Vindication, 76-77.
16 Wollstonecraft, Thoughts on the Education of Daughters, 1-2.
now become a more exclusive focus on education in general, with the aim to allow women to become more active citizens in society. We saw the beginnings of this more active and direct role in Margaret Fell’s and Mary Astell’s treatises, works that authoritatively commented on theological matters. Wollstonecraft takes it still further by directly stating it as the purpose of education and calling for education for all. In this way, her work is in some sense more similar to those earlier male-authored humanist texts that formulated educational models. Significantly, Wollstonecraft, too, considered the figure of Eve as did the earliest works examined in this study. She dismisses the preoccupation of Eve’s role in the Fall and women’s status relevant to men by turning the focus on Adam. For Wollstonecraft, the focus on the Creation story should only be worth consideration for how “it proves that man, from the remotest antiquity, found it convenient to exert his strength to subjugate his companion.”

Thus, it is not the fault of women if they have found themselves to be inferior to men, but rather, women have long been subjugated by men. Rational education for all will lead to virtue and a virtuous society.

The purpose of this study has been to examine more closely the prescriptive genre of early modern England in order to more deeply appreciate the ideas circulating in this period around women, their morality, and their education. Throughout the seventeenth century, these ideas became more and more contested, with writers using Scripture in order to argue for a more positive view of women and their intellectual abilities. Over time, we see women writers assuming more and more that women were spiritually equal to men, and therefore could study and teach on religious matters. This study has been a study of ideas, however, these ideas had real-world consequences for early modern women. As these prescriptive authors fought for a more robust education for women, early moderns began to pay more attention to girls’ education.

---

17 Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 95.
While girls’ schools in the early eighteenth century were still rather short-lived compared to boys’ schools, demand for girls’ boarding schools increased over this period as commercial prosperity increased efforts for upward mobility. While many learned women were autodidacts or benefitted from being educated alongside brothers or by a father or other male relation in the clergy, the eighteenth century saw the increase of a literate society that was more welcoming to newcomers, such as women. ¹⁸ Thus, the ideas expressed in the prescriptive genre are both symptomatic and influencers of this change.

Primary Sources:


Hill, William, 1619-1667. *A New-Years-Gift for Women. being a True Looking-Glass which they Seldome have in their Own Closets, Where (for the most Part) are None but Flattering Ones: But Hereby, and Herein, they may Truly, Plainly, and Directly, See their Duties, both Towards God, and their Own Husbands. with an Epistle Dedication, Directed to the Feminine Gender (Never done before) nor the Like Extant in no Printed Book. however, Many have Dedicated to One Or Two Vertuous Ladies, upon some Good Reasons Moving the Author Thereunto. but Never any (as this is) to the Whole Sex of Women, of what Rank Or Quality Soever they be* London, Printed by T.N. for the author, 1660. https://login.ezproxy.library.tufts.edu/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.ezproxy.library.tufts.edu/books/new-years-gift-women-being-true-looking-glass/docview/2240944832/se-2?accountid=14434.


Kennett, White. *The charity of schools for poor children recommended in a sermon preach'd in the parish-church of St. Sepulchers, May 16. 1706. Being Thursday in Whitson-week, the anniversary meeting of about three thousand of the poor children, boys and girls: with
their masters and mistresses, and many gentlemen engaged in promoting the charity-schools in and about the cities of London and Westminster. Publish'd at the request of many persons concerned in this charity. London, printed by Joseph Downing: and are to be sold by John Churchill, 1706. The Making of the Modern World

Leigh, Dorothy. The Mothers Blessing. Or the Godly COUNsaile of a Gentle-Woman Not Long since Deceased, Left Behind Her for Her Children Containing Many Good Exhortations, and Godly Admonitions, Profitable for all Parents to Leaue as a Legacy to their Children, but especially for those, Who by Reason of their Young Yeeres Stand most in Need of Instruction. by Mrs. Dorothy Leigh London, For John Budge, and are to be sold at the great South-dore of Paules, and at Brittaines Burse, 1616. https://login.ezproxy.library.tufts.edu/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.ezproxy.library.tufts.edu/docview/2240858488?accountid=14434.


Stubbes, Phillip. *A Chrstitall [Sic] Glasse for Christian Vvomen Containing a most Excellent Discourse of the Godlye Life and Christian Death of Mistresse Katherine Stubbes, Who Departed this Life in Burton Vpon Trent in Staffordshire the 14 Day of December : Vvith a most Heauenly Confession of the Christian Faith which Shee made a Little before Her Departure, as also a most Wonderfull Combat Betwixt Sathan and Her Soule, Worthy to be Imprinted in Letters of Gold and to be Engrauen in the Table of Euery Christian Heart / Set Downe Word for Word as She Spake it, as Neere as could Bee Gathered, by Phillip Stubbes Gent* London, For Edward White, and are to be sold at his shop at the little north doore of Paules at the signe of the Gunne, 1603. https://login.ezproxy.library.tufts.edu/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.ezproxy.library.tufts.edu/books/christiall-sic-glasse-christian-vwomen-containing/docview/2240927513/se-2?accountid=14434.


Woolley, Hannah, fl. 1670. *The Accomplish'd Lady's Delight in Preserving, Physick, Beautifying, and Cookery Containing, I. the Art of Preserving, and Candying Fruits and Flowers, and the Making of all Sorts of Conserves, Syrups, and Jellies : II. the Physical Cabinet, Or, Excellent Receipts in Physick and Chirurgery. Together with some Rare Beautifying Waters, to Adorn and Add Loveliness to the Face and Body, and also some New and Excellent Secrets and Experiments in the Art of Angling : III. the Compleat Cooks Guide, Or, Directions for Dressing all Sorts of Flesh, Fowl, and Fish, both in the English and French Mode, with all Sauces and Sallets, and the Making Pyes, Pasties, Tarts, and Custards, with the Forms and Shapes of Many of them London, Printed for Nath. Crouch, at the George at the lower end of Cornhil over against the Stocks-Market, 1677.


Woolley, Hannah, fl.1670. *The Gentlewomans Companion, Or, A Guide to the Female Sex Containing Directions of Behaviour in all Places, Companies, Relations and Conditions, from their Childhood Down to Old Age ... with Letters and Discourses upon all Occasions : Where Unto is Added, A Guide for Cook-Maids, Dairy-Maids, Chamber-Maids, and all Others that Go to Service, the Whole being an Exact Rule for the Female Sex in General / by Hannah Woolley London, Printed by A. Maxwell for Edward Thomas .., 1675.

Woolley, Hannah, fl.1670. *The Queen-Like Closet: Or, Rich Cabinet Stored with all Manner of Rare Receipts for Preserving, Candying and Cookery. very Pleasant and Beneficial to all Ingenious Persons of the Female Sex. to which is Added, A Supplement, Presented to all Ingenious Ladies, and Gentlewomen. by Hannah Woolley London, printed for R. Chiswel at the Rose and Crown in St. Paul's Church-Yard, and T. Sawbridge at the Three Flower-de-Luces in Little-Britain, 1684.
Secondary Sources:


