SAMUEL JOHNSON'S VIEWS ON WOMEN: FROM HIS WORKS

by

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ABSTRACT

An examination of Samuel Johnson's essays and his tragedy, *Irene*, and his Oriental tale, *Rasselas*, reveals that his concept of womanhood and his views on the education of woman and her role in society amount to a thorough-going criticism of the established views of eighteenth-century society. His views are in advance of those of his age. Johnson viewed the question of woman with that same practical good sense which he had brought to bear on literary criticism. It was important he said "to distinguish nature from custom: or that which is established because it was right, from that which is right only because it is established." Johnson thought that, so far as women were concerned, custom had dictated views and attitudes which reason denied. Because society's concept of womanhood emphasized the physical and Johnson's, the mental, there was little agreement about her education and her role in the home.

Johnson's views on women will be drawn from his works rather than from comments recorded by his biographers, James Boswell, Mrs. Thrale, or Sir John Hawkins, or from remarks made in the diaries and letters of Fanny Burney and Hannah More. With the exception of excerpts in Chapter V, comments made by others will be used only as substantiating evidence. In Chapter V, I have found it necessary to draw heavily on comments made by others simply because Johnson passed few remarks about anyone he knew - man or woman.
Chapter I sets forth eighteenth-century views on women from the viewpoint of society and from that of such men of letters as Addison, Steele, Pope, Defoe, Swift, and Johnson. The next two chapters will follow a chronological order; the discussion of Johnson's views on the education of women will precede his views on marriage and the woman's role in the home. The fourth chapter, a discussion of Johnson's figure of womanhood from *Irene* and *Rasselas*, can be considered as a summation of Chapters II and III, for these two works are really a comprehensive study of what Johnson had said about the education of women and their role in society in his *Rambler*, *Idler*, and *Adventurer*. This chapter will also include an analysis of Johnson's female characters as women. The purpose of the concluding chapter is to show that Johnson's estimation of woman-kind and his views on the education of women and their role in society are not to be taken lightly. Many men express one opinion about women but really believe something quite different. But not Johnson. He chose his female friends for those same qualities he said in his works were becoming womanhood. In life he treated them as he had written of them — with respect and without condescension.
To Professor S. E. Read,
Chairman of the Committee,
and
To Doctors P. Pinkus and I. S. Ross
sincere thanks.
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Chapter I

TENOR OF THE AGE

The object of this paper is to discuss Johnson's views on women in relation to those of his age and to show, by a detailed examination of his views on the education of women and of the role of women in society and of his concept of womanhood, that he was, for the most part, decidedly in advance of the thinking of the age.

Although the role of the woman in society is the point around which all other issues revolve because it governs the type of education she receives and influences the public's image of her, her education will be dealt with first, since this order would, from the viewpoint of chronology, be logical. Johnson's views on the education of women and their role in society will be drawn from his essays, and his comments recorded by his biographers, such as James Boswell, Mrs. Thrale, and Sir John Hawkins, will be cited mainly as substantiating evidence. His concept of womanhood will be taken from the figure of womanhood presented in his tragedy, Irene, and his Oriental tale, Rasselas. An examination of his figure of womanhood will also entail discussing his female characters as women. The design of the concluding chapter, "Theory and Practice," is to show that there was a great similarity between Johnson's figure of the estimable
woman expressed in his works and the type of women he chose as friends.

But before setting forth Johnson's views on women, it would be profitable to give first some idea of eighteenth-century views on women, both from the viewpoint of society and from that of other men of letters. Early in the century Alexander Pope, Jonathan Swift, Daniel Defoe, Joseph Addison, and Richard Steele had tried, by their criticism of womanhood, to remold society's thinking on at least three issues regarding women, for they thought society held false notions on all three. They did not think that the education society advocated for women was adequate, nor could they accept society's concept of the role of women in society, nor its image of womanhood. But, if men of letters agreed on the major issues, they disagreed remarkably on some of the details. For their opinions on all three issues, like those of the society they were criticizing, were completely regulated by and inextricably bound up with their own attitudes toward womankind and their estimation of what women were capable.

As for the type of training that would best fit a woman for her duties in life, society and men of letters agreed on one point only: that the end of a woman's education was marriage. On all other issues, they differed. Men of letters deplored society's denial of learning to women; they decried the type of education that society thought fitted a woman for her duties in
life because they disagreed about the nature of a wife's role. They were, therefore, faced with the formidable task of trying to revolutionize society's thinking about women.

Fashionable society — the noblemen and landed gentry, who were the only classes who had any opportunity to obtain a liberal education — was adverse to learning for men as well as women. For, what, they reasoned, did a woman have to learn other than arts to catch a husband and skills to manage a household? Under these circumstances it would not be surprising to find the greatest ignorance in the highest places. But society looked askance at learning for women for another reason; it firmly believed that "A little learning is a dang'rous thing," conducive to conceit, vanity and idleness. And it was not just the men who thought learning for women was superfluous; the majority of women thought likewise. Young ladies had no incentive to improve their minds, for men did not choose their wives on the basis of their sense and knowledge. The wise woman,


2 The classic example was the Duchess of Marlborough.


5 World, No. 130, II, 111-112.
if she had any learning, assiduously concealed it. Even Henry Fielding, whose attitude to women was most benign, had Squire Allsworthy praise Sophia Western for her lack of "pretense to wit" and her "deference to the understandings of men." And the Bluestockings, who were, at least in the beginning, accepted by men, were most careful not to display their knowledge too obviously lest they earn the name of pedants.

To convince society that the education it advocated for women trained them for nothing, different writers used different means. Defoe approached the problem by calmly appealing to reason: How sensible was a society that denied women the advantages of learning and then reproached them "every day with folly and impertinence . . . ."? "Their youth is spent [he said] to teach them to stitch and sew and make baubles. They are taught to read . . . and perhaps write their names or so, and that is the height of a woman's education. And I would but ask any who slight the sex for their understanding, what is a man (a gentleman, I mean) good for that is taught no more?" Pope, with delightful raillery, censured, in The Rape of the Lock, fashionable society which trained women in arts supposedly


becoming to the great lady—cards, painting, and the arts of
glances and intrigue. The only training society had provided
for them was to be had in a school for coquettes. Steele, in
his well-bred manner, in collaboration with John Hughes,
criticized the ridiculous behaviour that society expected of
women—the affected coyness, the simpering, the walking like
a "disengaged figure."9 Swift advocated that girls should be
allowed much the same education as boys10 instead of being sub­
jected at an early age to the dancing master and "with a collar
round her pretty neck, . . . taught a fantastical gravity of
behaviour, and forced to a particular way of holding her head,
heaving her breast, and moving with her whole body."11 Surely
there was a middle road which was preferable. Young women
should be taught natural, graceful movement, for gaucherie was
not acceptable in polite society. But all things must be kept
in their proper perspective; adornment of the mind was more
important than adornment of the person.

Men of letters needed arguments other than these to con­
vince society that its concept of a woman's education was
ridiculous. No one argued that it was barbarous and unthinkable
that the mind should be denied learning, for the majority of

9 The Spectator (London, 1847), No. 66, p. 79.
10 Jonathan Swift, Gulliver's Travels, ed. Herbert Davis
(Oxford, 1941), Book I, Chapter VI, p. 46; Book IV, Chapter
VIII, p. 253.
11 The Spectator, loc. cit.
the well-educated thought that education was the right of the privileged and rich male. They set forth other arguments which, considering the times, would be more persuasive. They claimed that book learning for women was not superfluous; that it was the panacea for most of the misery of man and all the ills that women fall heir to — vanity, affectation, love of finery, and lack of judgment. Pope and Swift, Addison and Steele, and Defoe, at the beginning of the century, and later, Johnson, all argued in the same vein; book learning was conducive to virtue. Just why they thought that learning would do for women what it had failed to do for men is a mystery, for there was no evidence that it had been conducive to virtue in men. But no one seems to have challenged them on the illogicality of this argument. For, in 1753, Edward Moore was arguing for respectability and still using the same argument as his predecessors had done: "Why (according to Pope) is every woman of fashion a rake in her heart, or why (according to truth) is almost every woman of fashion a rake in practice, but from the deplorable misfortune of an unlearned education?" None of the other men of letters under consideration ever went as far as Pope or Swift — as a matter of fact, Johnson said the exact opposite — but all argued that a woman, if educated, would be less likely to spend her time on nonsense, for she would have something else to think about. They all, like Johnson, thought that if a woman had instilled in her what was morally right, she would be less likely to do wrong. But the lessons of moral conduct, according

12 *World*, No. 20, I, 86.
to Johnson, had to be firmly and forcibly entrenched, for he
did not believe in the innate goodness of the human race.¹³

Virtue would not be the only benefit accruing from book
learning. Through learning, a woman could become more of a
companion to her husband than she had hitherto been. Learning
would provide her with topics of conversation by which she could
capture his attention so that he would not be forced to leave
home whenever he wanted to engage someone in talk. No one
emphasized this argument more than Swift and Johnson, for, to
them, nothing else would recommend a woman more to a man of
sense. But the idea that woman should be a companion to man ran
counter to the thought of the age. Society was only interested
in training a woman to catch a husband; men of letters were more
interested in ensuring that the marriage be satisfying both to
the man and the woman. They argued that, until such was the
case, marriage would be the state of misery it was.

When it came to suggesting what books these men of
letters thought would make a woman more virtuous and fit her
for the new role they conceived for her in the home, differences
arose. Each man's list depended on his estimation of a woman's
abilities. Jonathan Swift had no great estimation of women's

¹³ James Boswell, *Boswell's Journal of a Tour of the Hebrides
with Samuel Johnson, LL.D.*, ed. Frederick A. Pottle and Charles
H. Bennett (New York, 1936), p. 170. "Lady Macleod asked if no
man was naturally good. Johnson. 'No madam, no more than a
wolf.' Boswell. 'Nor no woman, sir?' Johnson. 'No, sir,' Lady
Macleod . . . 'This is worse than Swift'."
mental powers. He bluntly told one young lady that, after all the pains she might take, she would never surpass the proficiency of a school boy. He thought women should be satisfied with histories (in translation), books of travel, and tales of ancient heroes. 14 Addison's plan for reading was more ambitious than Swift's, for, if one judges from the list in an essay on "A Lady's Library," 15 he seems to indicate that he advocated philosophic and religious works: John Locke's An Essay Concerning Human Understanding (1690), Thomas Sherlock's A Practical Discourse Concerning Death (1689), Nicolas Malebranche's De la recherche de la vérité (1674), and Jeremy Taylor's Holy Living (1650) and Holy Dying (1651). He hints that a lady ought to acquire a reading facility in a language other than her mother tongue. More ambitious still were the plans proposed by Daniel Defoe and Samuel Johnson. They would deny women no sort of learning of which they were capable or in which they were interested. To deny women any type of learning Johnson called "a paltry trick," and Defoe called such a denial in a civilized society "barbarous." 17 Defoe thought that the education of women should be more systematic; that academies should be set up for young ladies where they could learn, besides the social graces, French and Italian. He particularly advocated the study of


15 The Spectator, No. 37, p. 45.


history so that they might be able to judge of things.\textsuperscript{18}

Johnson thought the study of history would do little for man or woman. The subjects he chose belied his own preferences. He advocated more arithmetic and even chemistry and astronomy if a woman was interested in these. His educational scheme was even more masculine than Defoe's.

There was one point, though, on which the majority of men of literature did agree; they censured the reading of heroic romances which had become the craze with the leisured female. Addison thought them a waste of good time,\textsuperscript{19} but Johnson attacked this fad on other grounds. He, like the fourth Earl of Chesterfield\textsuperscript{20} and Richard Berenger,\textsuperscript{21} objected to them because they gave women false notions about men, marriage, and love and led them to expect of life what life could not possibly offer. But there were exceptions, of course. William Whitehead,\textsuperscript{22} a contemporary of Johnson, thought, as Swift did,\textsuperscript{23} that heroic tales provided pleasurable reading and could do little harm to the minds of young women because there was no danger that female readers would identify themselves with the heroines or men with the heroes. Furthermore, the highest of moral codes upheld by

\textsuperscript{18} "An Essay on Projects," p. 146.
\textsuperscript{19} The Spectator, No. 37, p. 45.
\textsuperscript{20} World, No. 25, I, 108-111.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., No. 79, I, 331. \textsuperscript{22} Ibid., No. 19, I, 84.
the heroes and heroines could serve as models to the readers.
It was the "could serve" to which Johnson objected. For him to approve of any literary work, it must obviously and directly draw a moral. Nothing must be left to chance. If he criticized Shakespeare's plays for their lack of moral didacticism, the majority of the novels had little chance of escaping his censure.

The change men of letters advocated in the education of women was only the beginning. Their views on education were, like society's, bound closely with their views on marriage, for the first was only a preparation for the second. If there were differences of opinion on the one, there would be differences of opinion on the other. When it came to marriage, men of letters could no more accept society's attitude to marriage than its concept of it.

No one was more interested in the problems involved in marriage than Johnson, for he not only wrote of these in his Rambler, Adventurer, and Idler, but he also devoted four chapters in his Rasselas to what he called "The Debate on Marriage." But it is not from Johnson's rather detached discussion on marriage that one learns of society's attitude to it, but from an essayist, John Hughes: "A state of wedlock was the common mark of all the adventures in a farce or comedy, as well as essayers in lampoons

24 The Works of Samuel Johnson, Connoisseurs' Edition (New York, 1903), "Preface to Shakespeare," XII, 1. All citations from The Rambler, The Adventurer, The Idler, and all volumes of The Lives of the Poets with the exception of Volume X will be made from this edition. In place of Volume X in the Connoisseurs' Edition, Volume XI of the Works (London, 1769), will be used.
and satire to shout at; and nothing was a more standing jest, in all the clubs of fashionable mirth and gay conversation."\(^{25}\) Addison's comment on the common ridicule made of the state of marriage was that such an attitude was "the mark of a degenerate and vicious age."\(^{26}\) Rather than brook ridicule by his fellows, a man would use his wife unkindly or treat her with indifference. The worst appellation a man could attain was that of a fond husband.\(^{27}\)

Men like John Hughes, Addison, and especially Steele, tried to restore dignity to marriage and to reinstate the word "wife" as a term of honour and respect. In the fashionable world, "wife" was not "the most amiable term in human life"\(^{28}\) as Steele would have had it, but a by-word for jest. The wedding band was the cloak that covered a multitude of indiscretions and liberties.\(^{29}\) In a time of much laxity, these men were trying to convince men and women that the greatest felicity was to be found in a chaste marriage.

They were aware, though, that marriage was more a state of misery than the state of happiness they pictured it. What else, they asked, could man expect? He allowed others to choose the woman with whom he was to spend the rest of his life; if he chose for himself, he chose from the most foolish motives.

\(^{25}\) The Spectator, No. 525, p. 600.

\(^{26}\) Ibid., No. 261, p. 296. 27 Ibid., No. 525, p. 600.

\(^{28}\) The Tatler, ed. George Aitken (London, 1898), No. 33, I, 271.

\(^{29}\) Connoisseur, No. 4, I, 14.
imaginable, and once married, he treated his wife as a being of a different order.

On the question of who should make the choice of the mate — the parents or the children — even men of letters expressed divided opinions. Addison, Steele, and Johnson expressed what would be, to eighteenth-century society, a radical view; they were not of the opinion that it was the prerogative of parents to choose mates for their children. They thought that there was much to be said in defense of letting young men and women select their own mates, for, to these writers, personal liking was an important factor in marriage. Johnson seemed to have regarded parental choice as an infringement of individual rights. The argument set forth by George Savile in "Advice to a Daughter" and by Swift in "A Letter to a Very Young Lady on Her Marriage," that parents should make the choice because they were wiser, Johnson might have called cant. He was not the respecter of parental control as is often supposed; nor did he think that wisdom necessarily came with age.

30 The Spectator, No. 261, p. 296.
31 Ibid., No. 390, p. 452.
34 Prose Works, XI, 115.
35 The Rambler, No. 148, III, 223.
It was not age, but youth, who had virtuous ideals. Johnson knew what kind of sense parents employed when they chose for their children; marriage was no more than a financial proposition. To be sold or to sell oneself had no place in Johnson's code of morals.

All agreed, however, and none more than Johnson, that much of the unhappiness in marriage, if difficult to avoid, was, at least, not unavoidable. The misery stemmed, they argued, from a foolish choice of a mate: "... the mischief generally proceeds from the unwise choice people make for themselves, and an expectation of happiness from things not capable of giving it. Nothing but the good qualities of the person beloved can be a foundation for a love of judgment and discretion; and whoever expects happiness from anything but virtue, wisdom, good-humour, and a similitude of manners will find themselves widely mistaken." Fashionable society was not interested in women with such virtues but chose rather the social butterfly if she had beauty and, what was more to the point, if she was decked in finery that encouraged expectations of a substantial fortune. To society, marriage was an exchange of coin and acreage.

As for marrying for love, everyone considered it the weakest motive for marriage, worse even than a marriage contracted


37 *The Spectator*, No. 261, p. 305.
for wealth. In commenting on Lady Betty More's marriage to George Rockfort, Swift expressed the current opinion on a love-match: "... yours was a match of prudence and good liking, without any mixture of that ridiculous passion which has no being but in play-books and romances." 38

Perhaps the major point of conflict between the age and writers was not who should make the choice, nor what the basis of the choice should be, but what the position of the woman should be in the home. George Savile had presented society's point of view in his "Advice to a Daughter"; a woman's duty in marriage was to propagate the species and manage the household. He indulged his daughter with little hope of happiness in marriage; hers was to be a life of self-negation and servility: "You are to make your best of what is settled by Law and Custom, and not vainly imagine, that it will be changed for your sake." 39

Law and custom had settled that a woman's relationship to her husband had been ordained by Providence; man had been endowed with superior reason, and was, therefore, a fit governor. A wife's watch-words were obedience as to a master and patient and silent endurance. Her only influence over her husband lay in cajolery. 40 If her husband treated her badly, she had really no

38 Swift, op. cit., p. 119.
39 Savile, op. cit., p. 10.
40 Ibid., pp. 12-17.
means of redress, for the only means open to her, no respectable woman would risk taking.

What George Savile had kindly but firmly tried to convey to his daughter in order to prepare her for marriage, Daniel Defoe put bluntly: society regarded women only as stewards, cooks, and slaves. If anyone among eighteenth-century writers was a whole-hearted champion of the cause of womankind, it was Defoe. Although he knew that he would have not only the literati against him but also the whole of society, he boldly asserted that the notion that God had endowed men with certain qualities and women with a set of a different order was to slight the Godhead. Such an assertion he said had no basis in reason.

There was no question in Defoe's mind whether women, if given the opportunity of learning, could be fit companions to men. Neither Swift nor Addison — not even Steele nor Johnson — regarded women in quite the same way as Defoe.

Swift had little hope that a wife could become a companion to her husband; still he considered it an outrageous notion that a woman's only duties were domestic in nature.

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41 Defoe, op. cit., p. 152.
42 Ibid., p. 150.
43 The Correspondence of Jonathan Swift, ed. F. E. Ball (London, 1913), V, No. CMLXV, 95-96.
Addison, Steele, and Johnson offered more hope, for they regarded marriage as the strictest tie of friendship. Marriage was, to Addison, an intimate friendship in which "all the sweets of life" were to be shared. To Steele, a wife was one "who will divide [a husband's] cares and double his joys." These views became all the more unusual when one considers that the Earl of Chesterfield said that a man of sense only trifled with his wife and made her believe he consulted her only to flatter her vanity. And another view held by Chesterfield — that a wife was to be regarded as a doll and a plaything — was also the fashionable world's idea of the fashionable woman. At the end of the century Mary Wollstonecraft said that such was still the view current among men. In 1712, Steele had objected to husbands' regarding their wives only as a gratification for desire and blamed this attitude for much of the unhappiness in marriage. It also offended Steele's sense of justice, for such an attitude implied that women were creatures of a much lower order, who were not allowed to have feelings, or desires, or to be subject to the same moods as men. Steele believed that the husband was the master but that the wife was no meek slave.

44 The Spectator, No. 261, p. 296.
45 The Tatler, No. 139, 135.
46 The Rambler, No. 18, I, 121.
47 The Spectator, loc. cit.
48 Ibid., No. 268, p. 305.
49 The Letters of Philip Stanhope, the Earl of Chesterfield, with Characters, ed. John Bradshaw (London, 1892), I, 141-142.
51 The Spectator, No. 479, p. 549.
As for Johnson, it was the woman of spirit, one like the Aspasia of his own Irene, that he admired. Johnson never wrote what he thought about the meek, obedient wife, but he had a great deal to say on this score: "'Being married to those sleepy-souled women is just like playing at cards for nothing; no passion is excited, and the time is filled up . . . they are but creepers at best, and commonly destroy the tree they . . . cling about'." 52

There was a definite relationship between the concept that society and men of letters had of womankind and the image each created of her. Both images reflect the thought and taste of their creators. Society believed that man and woman had been endowed by Providence with different excellencies; woman, with beauty to snare men; and men, with reason to rule women. By divorcing beauty from intellect, society created an image of woman that was purely physical. In an age in which elegance was highly prized, one would expect society to choose its ideal of womanhood from the fashionable world. The image was then set. She was a Belinda, 53 a born beauty, or one made so by art, and one who, finding time lying heavy because the "noble Seat of Thought" 54 had not been touched, was forced to turn to entertainment to fill up the vacuity of life.


53 i.e., Belinda of Pope's The Rape of the Lock.

54 Pope, Moral Essays, Epistle II: To a Lady: Of the Characters of Women, 1. 74, Works, III.ii, 55.
Although men of letters believed that man's reasoning powers exceeded a woman's, they never subscribed to society's virtual denial of intellect in a woman, or they would never have advocated the type of education for her that they did. Although Pope and Swift had no elevated opinion of a woman's mind — the former called women rakes at heart,\(^5^5\) and the latter likened women to monkeys\(^5^6\) — each attributed the follies of women to a lack of learning and not to a deficiency of intellect. Pope's ideal of woman was that she be a "softer Man.\(^5^7\) Swift endowed Vanessa with beauty and intellect.\(^5^8\) And the beautiful Aspasia of Johnson's Irene seems as if she would stand an intellectual giant among the majority of men.

Society regarded one other quality necessary to complete its image — that of chastity, which has ever been associated with the ideal of womanhood. Society expected little in the way of other virtues. One usually expects little in the way of excellencies of something which one thinks incapable of excellence. A woman might be malicious, deceitful, indolent, or peevish, but as long as she was not willing to play the wenches, society called her virtuous.\(^5^9\) Men of letters had no such concept of what

\(^{55}\) Pope, l. 216, Works, III. ii, 65.
\(^{56}\) "To a Very Young Lady on Her Marriage," XI, 120.
\(^{57}\) Pope, l. 272, Works, III. ii, 70.
\(^{58}\) "Cadenus and Vanessa," II, 692-693.
\(^{59}\) The Spectator, No. 390, p. 452.
constituted a virtuous woman. To them, virtue meant good-humour, modesty, integrity, and understanding. Swift thought there was no virtue becoming to a man which was not becoming to a woman, save, perhaps, a degree of cowardice. Johnson's Aspasia is just such a woman; she is a female Demetrius.

Although none of the writers who have been considered in this chapter expressed in a comprehensive way his concept of an ideal woman, as Johnson did in his Irene, from what each did say it appears that Johnson expected more of a woman than they. Yet it is not difficult to conceive that Johnson might envision an ideal woman, for he, like Steele, wrote of woman with respect. There is no trace of malice to be found in the essays in which he writes of women. But the same cannot be said of Swift. Although his letter "On the Death of Mrs. Johnson [Stella]" is a panegyric to Mrs. Esther Johnson as is his Vanessa in "Cadenus and Vanessa" on Esther Vanhomrigh, his tone to Lady Betty More in "A Letter to a Very Young Lady on Her Marriage" is worse than patronizing. Perhaps Swift's unstinted praise of these two particular women was slightly influenced by his regard for them and by the fact that to each of them he had acted as a mentor, intellectually and morally. He does not seem to offer much hope that women in general would ever amount to much. He advised Lady Betty More to look to men for companionship, not women,

60 "To a Very Young Lady on Her Marriage," XI, 122.
for she would not be able to find among her own sex a suitable companion.61 If one places much emphasis on Swift's comment on womankind in general in *Gulliver's Travels*, it is difficult to believe that Swift could envision an Aspasia: "I could not reflect with some Amazement, and much Sorrow, that Rudiments of *Lewdness, Coquetry, Censure*, and *Scandal*, should have a Place by Instinct in Womanhood."62 Doctor Johnson had no great opinion of Swift's concept of womanhood: "The readers to Swift's 'Letter to a Lady on her Marriage' may be allowed to doubt whether his opinion of female excellence ought implicitly to be allowed; for if his general thought on woman were such as he exhibits, a very little sense in a Lady would enrapture, and very little virtue would astonish him."63 There is, however, little in the letter to substantiate Johnson's comment that very little virtue in a woman would astonish Swift. The major difference between Johnson's concept of woman and Swift's is that Johnson expected more of a woman intellectually than Swift did. At least Johnson's views on the education of women and his comment on Stella point to this: "She had not much literature, for she could not spell her own language; and of her wit, so loudly vaunted, the smart sayings which Swift himself has collected afford no splendid specimens."64

61 "To a Very Young Lady on Her Marriage," XI, 118.
64 *Loc. cit.*
Johnson thought that women, though inferior to men intellectually, had a greater mental capacity than other men of letters (Defoe excepted) credited them with. He would, therefore, have little patience with a society in which women's "acquaintance with books was distinguished only to be censured." He did not doubt that women, if properly educated, could provide men with companionship in marriage. His figure of the estimable woman leaves little doubt of this. And the fact that there is no contradiction between the figure Johnson presented of womanhood in his works and the type of woman he sought as companions, nor between the attitude toward women he expressed in his works and the way he treated them during his life, only adds strength to the opinions he expressed in his works.

65 Lives of the Poets, IX, 198.
Johnson's views on the education of women differed radically from those held by eighteenth-century society. Johnson was certainly no egalitarian; still, he thought that everyone, including women, should receive the basics of education — reading, writing, and arithmetic. He did not believe, as society did, that the kind of education one received should be rigidly determined by one's sex, rank, or station in society; some attention should be paid to the intellectual potential of the individual. These views are characteristic of Johnson, for, considering his regard for the mind, and considering, too, his own character, one would hardly expect him to deny to others what had been allowed to him. It should be pointed out, however, that Johnson argued in favour of education for women, not because he thought ability should not be denied, but because he regarded education as a weapon against vice. And just as it is characteristic of "men of weight" to be charitable and magnanimous to others without trace of condescension, so it was with Johnson. He could, like the majority of men, regard woman as man's intellectual inferior, and yet, unlike them, regard her as a reasonable creature and book learning not outside the compass of her wits. Only the most enlightened of educated men would have considered women capable of mastering what Johnson regarded as suitable
studies for women. The education that society advocated for women fit them for one of two roles: if a woman belonged to the lower class, she was likely fit only to be a man's housekeeper; if she belonged to the upper class, she was probably fit for nothing other than the role of the society matron. Everyone agreed that "the great end of female education was to get a husband."\(^1\) Disagreement arose over the means to this end. Johnson thought that a happy balance should be struck. Since a woman would have to act as a manager of a household and as a mother and, what was more important than either of these, as a companion to her husband, Johnson thought that some time should be given to books, some to learning domestic skills, and some to cultivating the social graces.

Johnson had no fear that educating the masses, male or female, would disturb the status quo, for the meagre education that most would receive would not enable them to make any perceptible change in the existing class system. Only genius broke through such a barrier. Although it was not impossible for a woman to do so, it was certainly very difficult.\(^2\) Depriving the poor of an education was, to Johnson, just another means of making life miserable for them. He sympathized with Molly Quick, the maid-in-waiting, when she complained that her mistress

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1 *The Adventurer*, No. 74, IV, 285, 287.

2 Because of her literary success in 1778, Fanny Burney was made Keeper of the Robes, a position which enabled her to move in the lower court circle.
flaunted her knowledge of literature in an attempt to make her feel stupid. Molly observed that her mistress had confused lack of knowledge with lack of understanding and opportunity. Johnson has Betty Broom and one of her mistresses, an impoverished gentlewoman, reading the same books and both delighting in discussing them together. The gentlewoman is not conscious that she is condescending by discussing authors with her maid. However, Johnson was certainly no leveller of society. He paid due deference to rank, but, in intellectual matters he was a respecter of neither rank, age, nor sex. He once called a countess, who was incidentally a favourite of his, a dunce because she thought Laurence Sterne's writings pathetic. He encouraged Fanny Burney as a rising wit to challenge Mrs. Montagu's position in literary circles.

Betty Broom's other mistresses voiced the opinion of everyone except the most enlightened of the educated. Society thought that to teach the poor even the rudiments of reading, writing, and arithmetic was to foster insolence and idleness, and to make them dissatisfied with downright labour. Keeping the poor laborious was to many synonymous with keeping them ignorant.

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3 The Idler, No. 46, V, 237. 4 Ibid., No. 29, V, 169.
6 Madame D'Arblay, Diary and Letters, I, 115-117.
7 The Idler, No. 26, V, 154-160.
Mandeville bluntly expressed the current opinion that it was economically unsound to educate the poor: "In a free nation where slaves are not allowed, the surest wealth was a multitude of laborious Poor." But society feared educating the poor for reasons other than economic. From education, the poor would only learn to ape their betters. The patron of the Charity School which Betty Broom attended had been convinced that the poor man's children, once educated, would forget their subservience and encroach upon the privileges of their richer neighbours. This fear was, to the wealthier, a real dread. The learned often had to allay such fears by suggesting that the Charity School prepared its charges only for menial tasks in society. And furthermore, the garments provided for the students would act as a constant reminder to them that they were subjects of charity. Such garments would remind them of their servile position rather than instil in them any feeling of vanity.

Yet it was not just the élite who feared universal education; the poor themselves were suspicious of it. The value of an education for girls, or as a matter of fact for boys, was by no means an established or accepted fact. The time spent at school only took from that which might be more profitably spent


9 The Idler, No. 26, V, 154-160.

in the fields or in the factory. In 1735, there were, in the whole of England, slightly less than four thousand girls from the poor attending Charity Schools.  

Those poor who considered it a waste of time to educate their sons would certainly consider it an even greater waste of time to educate their daughters. Hannah More was so appalled by the vice and ignorance of the poor when she canvassed Cheddar prior to establishing a girls' school there, that she said she would not have believed such conditions existed outside of Africa. A great number of the parents she said refused to send their children unless they were paid; others suspected her of insidious schemes once she had them in her power.

Johnson, like Hannah More, saw in education what society was blind to: that education could be an effective means for curbing vice and eliminating ignorance. And, like Pope, he believed that so far as a woman's morals were concerned:

'Tis Education forms the common mind:
Just as the twig is bent the tree's inclined.  

He advocated education for both the rich and poor alike because he believed that learning, however meagre, was conducive to virtue. The first question he asked the prostitutes he met on his midnight rambles in the streets of London was whether they could read.  

His question may, at first, seem naïve, yet when

11 Gardiner, English Girlhood at School, p. 305.
one considers what was taught the poor in the Charity Schools, it is not so. By far the greatest emphasis was laid on the reading of the Bible and Biblical history, and on the recitation of prayers and the catechism. Although the boarding schools placed less emphasis on religious instruction and more on the acquisition of social graces, still these schools emphasized modesty and propriety. Perdita, after attending a country boarding school, came to despise her father for his loose morals. Johnson thought that there was a definite relationship between the education a woman received and her virtue. It is not strange, then, that he should say that women of gentle birth, because they were better educated, were more virtuous and thereby made better wives and mothers, since they were willing to forgo gratification of their own desires. Perhaps Johnson's opinion was partially regulated by the fact that, since he was not himself of noble birth, he had a high opinion of those who were. Perhaps not, for he praised the women of his own age on the same grounds: they were, he said, more virtuous than the women of former ages because they had greater opportunities of developing their mental powers. And certainly women of the middle class had greater opportunity of developing their minds, for they had leisure time; they were not expected to work in or to supervise

15 The Idler, No. 42, V, 222-223.
17 Ibid., III, 3.
Johnson thought that if they turned to reading, this would provide them with something to think about and something to talk about. They would not, then, be like Euphelia, who was so desperate for topics of conversation that her proposed trip to the country "was a great relief to the barrenness of our topics," for she could now relate "the pleasures that were in store for me." If women spent their time reading, he also felt that they would be less likely to be driven by boredom and idleness to commit foolish indiscretions. Thus Bellaria's mother and aunt had tried to instil in her a love of books because the habit of reading would enable her "to fill up the vacuities of life without the help of silly or dangerous amusements, and preserve [her] from the snares of idleness and the inroads of temptation."20

Since Johnson thought reading could do so much, the formal education that he would advocate for women would obviously emphasize book learning. And because he did emphasize book learning for women, it is also obvious that he could not have regarded women as society did: as creatures without reason. Society would have considered the educational scheme he envisaged too masculine, and totally unnecessary for a woman, and definitely outside the scope of a woman's intellect. If one deduces

19 The Rambler, No. 42, I, 270-276.
20 Ibid., No. 191, IV, 114.
Johnson's ideas on the education of women from his play *Irene*, one would conclude that their education would not differ radically from that of the men:

> Thy Soul, by Nature great, enlarg'd by Knowledge
> Soars unencumber'd with our idle Cares,
> and all ASPASIA but her Beauty's Man.  

When Boswell asked Johnson if he should give his daughter a liberal education, Johnson replied: "... let them learn all they can learn — it is a paltry trick to deny Women the cultivation of their Mental Powers, and I think it is partially a proof we are afraid of them, if we endeavour to keep them unarmed." Johnson did not believe, like the majority of men, that women should be deliberately handicapped by denying them the right to develop their mental powers. Intellectually they were by nature handicapped; man was the superior of the species:

> When social Laws first harmonis'd the World,
> Superior Man possess'd the Charge of Rule,

Even so, Johnson had a better opinion of the mind of woman than most men. He criticized men of letters for thinking that, in order to be popular with the ladies, they must talk of trifles. "There is," he said, "no longer any danger lest the scholar

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23 *Irene*, III.VII. 70-71.

24 Hawkins, *loc. cit.*
should want an adequate audience at the tea-table." Women, he said, were interested in science, in serious and rational discussion, and in literary criticism. He thought such subjects as Latin, chemistry, astronomy, and mathematics suitable studies for women. He taught Queeney Thrale and Fanny Burney Latin, not because it was of any use to them, but to a good classicist like Johnson, anyone who aspired to a knowledge of books should be able to read the ancient Latin authors in the original. But Fanny Burney gave up her Latin studies because her father thought it too manly a subject for a woman. Dr. Burney would also have considered chemistry too masculine a subject for women. And society would have agreed with him. But Johnson did not think that such subjects would rob a woman of her femininity. He admired Anna Williams for her knowledge of chemistry. When she was planning to publish a dictionary of scientific terms, Johnson wrote to Samuel Richardson, soliciting him as a publisher to take shares in the copy: "She is certainly qualified for her work," wrote Johnson, "as much as any one that will ever undertake it. . . . She deserves all the encouragement that can be given her. . . ." The mad astronomer in Rasselas, who expressed unbounded admiration for Pekuah's knowledge of astronomy, was really expressing Johnson's sentiments. If Johnson would not have looked upon Pekuah "as a prodigy of genius," he would certainly have "entreated her not to desist from the study."
There was one other rather masculine subject, mathematics, which usually had no place in a young lady's education (or if it had, the arithmetic was really reckoning involving no more than keeping a simple account of expenditures), but Johnson thought it would provide good mental exercise for women, and it was, furthermore, a practical subject. He repeatedly urged Queeney Thrale to persevere in her study of arithmetic and even advised her what text to use.28

Johnson did not expect a young woman to set aside her books once her formal education terminated, or once she married. The majority of the books which Johnson thought suitable for women required more understanding than a young miss would have at the age of thirteen or fifteen, or a young lady, at the age of eighteen or twenty. However, Johnson never made the basis of his selection of books he considered suitable for women dependent on the degree of understanding necessary for comprehension. His criterion was strictly a moral one and irrespective of the age of the woman. A book that was not suitable for the young woman of twenty was still not suitable for her in middle age. Hannah More was thirty-five when Johnson castigated her for reading Tom Jones: "I never saw Johnson angry with me but once, I alluded . . . to some witty passages in 'Tom Jones:' he replied, 'I am shocked to hear you quote from so vicious a book. I am

sorry to hear you have read it. A confession which no modest lady should ever make. I scarcely know a more corrupt work." Johnson placed Tobias Smollett's *Roderick Random* in the same category as Fielding's *Tom Jones*. To Johnson, a vicious book was one in which the author had so mingled the good and bad in his characters that the reader followed their adventures with delight without abhorring them for their faults. In such novels the author, by following nature, had made his heroes splendidly wicked. Johnson believed that vice should always disgust. In Fielding vice often elicits humour. As one would expect, Johnson wholeheartedly approved of Samuel Richardson's novels. They inculcate morality; virtue never goes unrewarded; and vice, never unpunished. For the same reasons, such novels as Fanny Burney's *Evelina* met with his approval. Johnson set no value on those fantastic narratives which were innocuous enough but whose only merit lay in their plot. No one could turn to these books again and again unless one wished to escape into a dream world. Nothing could be learned from this type of book. For these reasons, he did not think women should be satisfied with romances of the exploits of ancient heroes.


30 *The Rambler*, No. 4, I, 24, said to have been written because of the popularity of *Tom Jones* and *Roderick Random*.

31 *The Idler*, No. 84, VI, 29.

Other forms of narrative writing, such as travelogues, Johnson thought a waste of time unless they instructed as well as pleased. The greatest drawback to the travelogue was that the writer usually spent far too little time in the places he described to give a reliable picture of the manner of the life there. The one form of narrative writing which Johnson favoured above all others was, of course, biography. And the reason for his fondness was a moral one. The individual could easily learn from biography because it could "most readily be applied to the purpose of life." From it, one could learn to moderate one's desires by contemplating the end to which the follies, weaknesses, and vices had led man. Although Johnson never said that he considered his *Life of Richard Savage* as suitable reading for a woman, he would likely have considered it so. The biography is not a panegyric on Savage; he has recounted his follies as well as his virtues.

There were other types of prose works which did not provide light reading but which Johnson thought should appeal to women; for example, sermons or other religious works, his own moral essays, and those of Addison and Steele. Fanny Burney was amused when Johnson recommended that she read the Reverend John Norris' *Theory of Love*. She had interpreted the title in its 

33 *The Idler*, No. 97, VI, 74.
34 Ibid., No. 84, VI, 28. See also *The Rambler*, No. 60, II, 31-37.
35 Mme. D'Arblay, *op. cit.*, I, 114.
narrowest sense. Johnson soon informed her that Norris used the word "love" to designate all inordinate desires. He recommended Law's Serious Call to a Holy Life, a book which Mrs. Thrale thought had supplied Johnson with topics for his Rambler. He also thought that women might find literary criticism interesting. At one time, Bellaria had thought that, as a theatre-goer, she should know something about the principles of drama. She had, therefore, read Dryden's remarks on tragedy. According to Fanny Burney, Johnson had, at the Streatham breakfast table, read portions of his Lives of the Poets to her and Mrs. Thrale. He presented Fanny Burney with a copy of his Life of Cowley and Mrs. Thrale with his Life of Waller. In August of 1780, Fanny wrote to Mrs. Thrale that Johnson had "delighted me with another volume of his Lives, — that which contains Blackmore, Congreve, etc. . . ."  

Johnson thought that women were capable of reading and enjoying books which most men would have thought them uninterested in and incapable of understanding. Johnson once said that young children should be given fairy tales to read because these stretched their little minds. No doubt Johnson hoped that the books he recommended for women would do the same for them.

36 Piozzi, op. cit., I, 114.
37 The Rambler, No. 191, IV, 115.
38 Mme. D'Arblay, op. cit., I, 114, 443.
Even though Johnson emphasized book learning for women, he did not think book learning alone constituted a young lady's education. Since her education was a preparation for marriage, the young lady must be conversant with things other than books: "An empty head adorned with literature [in this case Greek literature] will do little for a Wench." A woman should have some knowledge of domestic skills. What Johnson objected to was that type of education which schooled women only in domesticity. The majority thought that, since a woman's life was centred in the home, there was no point in giving her an education in the Johnsonian sense. The only education they thought essential was that which trained a woman in domestic skills and home management, and perhaps a little knowledge of home remedies in case of illness. But nothing more. Under such an educational scheme, it is not surprising to find Lady Bustle virtually illiterate, nor to learn that one gallant ceased to pay court to a young lady because she could not read the verses he wrote to her. There must have been many daughters like those described in The Idler, No. 13, who were kept so engrossed in working firescreens, tapestries, and in making quilts for which the family had no use, that they were

39 Piozzi, op. cit., I, 169.
40 The Rambler, No. 51, I, 330.
41 The Adventurer, No. 74, IV, 289.
illiterate. Johnson certainly thought such skills as needlework efficacious, for it was one of those little things in life which women could do and not disgrace themselves. He realized that it was not only useful but also relaxing. Besides, it kept women out of mischief. But he urged Queeney Thrale to mind both her needle and her books, for a woman who knew only the arts of needlework and the cuisine was a poor match for a man with any sense and understanding. Johnson had been witness to such a match between his parents: "Had my mother been more literate they had been better companions." and Johnson's portrait of Lady Bustle corroborates what he thought of the woman whose sole recommendation as a wife was her pickles, jellies, and orange puddings. What Johnson said of Lady Bustle, he might have applied to his Mrs. Busy; they were both "neutral beings," who, in an attempt to keep a house in order, forgot to live.

Just as Johnson criticized the one-sided nature of the education usually given to the women of the lower classes, so he criticized the fashionable world's idea of a fashionable education on the same grounds. He did not disapprove of boarding schools per se; at least here the young miss would be less

42 The Idler, No. 13, V, 110-112.
43 Queeney Letters, p. 36.
44 Boswell's Life, I, 7.
45 The Rambler, No. 138, III, 159-165.
likely to acquire an elevated opinion of herself;\textsuperscript{46} since children are never kind in their comments to one another. But he did think that the fashionable boarding schools placed undue emphasis on social skills and failed to provide their students with anything resembling solid learning. But a society which forbade women studying Latin and reckoned "folly ... so much our sphere, that we are sooner pardoned any excess of that, than the least pretensions to reading and good sense,"\textsuperscript{47} would not be likely to include much book learning in its educational programme. The education of a fashionable young lady could hardly be termed an education. Her education would include, besides such obvious skills as sewing, some instruction in music and drawing, and perhaps a little geography.\textsuperscript{48} The quality of the instruction was, indeed, questionable, for she studied drawing only so that she might sketch a landscape and display it; and music so that it would enable her to voice polite "nothings" at or after a performance. But irrespective of the quality of the instruction, Johnson set no value on either of these subjects.

But the girls in the boarding schools often fared better

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., No. 189, IV, 105; Piozzi, Anecdotes, I, 250. "Boarding schools [said Johnson] were established for the conjugal quiet of the parents."


\textsuperscript{48} Mary Wollstonecraft, On the Education of daughters: with Reflections on Female Conduct in the most important Duties of Life (London, 1787), pp. 25, 26, 43.
than those tutored at home. Johnson was aware that many an ambitious mother gave her daughters what she considered a sound education—cards, dancing, and the harpsichord—and thought these accomplishments coupled with beauty would attract eligible bachelors. He has one young lady who had been subjected to this sort of education complain that, after the loss of her beauty, no man of sense and a fortune would have her because she had no means by which she could interest him. Only then did she realize that she was the victim of an educational scheme based on short terms and narrower principles. Her fashionable education had stressed social graces, but in the greatest of social graces—the art of conversation—it had provided no instruction because it had never put into her hands the books which would have provided her with topics of conversation.

If Johnson placed less emphasis on the social graces than society did, it was not that he thought these totally unimportant. He found ease, grace, and elegance appealing in a woman; he praised Pekuah for telling her tale of captivity to the mad astronomer with such "ease and elegance [that] her conversation took possession of his heart."  And he was certainly no enemy to anything which might provide innocent gaiety and saw no harm in young ladies dancing, or playing cards, or being

49 The Rambler, No. 113, III, 111-117. See also Ibid., No. 42, I, 270-276.

50 Rasselas, Chapter XLVI, p. 602.
interested in dress, provided they did not make these their only concern. Such amusements not only provided variety and helped to fill up the vacuity of life but they also made the bitter pill of life more palatable. But, to Johnson, the woman whose life was one round of social engagements was the woman who had other weaknesses. She invariably lacked sense and judgment and had a mistaken set of values. She was like Bellaria, who, because she lacked the knowledge to be gained from book learning, was unable "to distinguish the superficial glitter of vanity from the solid merit of understanding."51 She set her whole store on beauty, adornment of dress, and amusements, not on virtue, piety, or understanding. Yet she was not entirely to blame, for, as Johnson pointed out, she had noticed that even men of sense and understanding, who said they valued virtue and understanding above all else in a woman, paid court only to beauty.52 But she did not have the sense to prefer the man of sense but looked for happiness in the society of fools and was impressed by superficial things—the embroidered coat and the handsome uniform.53 Such women mistook the man who had a stock of anecdotes for a wit. In Rambler, No. 141, such a wit paints a very unflattering picture of those women who relied on amusement and mistook it for life. His criticism of them is even

51 The Rambler, No. 191, IV, 114.
52 Ibid., No. 66, II, 73-74.
53 The Idler, No. 5, V, 76-80.
more pointed, since he himself is a fool; yet he complains of the misery he suffered trying to think up trivia to amuse giddy women. He suggests that women dread the man of understanding and learning because they cannot manage him. By managing, the wit meant that the women realized that they would not be able to placate the man of sense by tears, caresses, or other guiles.\textsuperscript{54} They, therefore, chose their companions, not for their understanding, integrity, or moral worth, but for their ability to amuse them with trivia. Johnson invariably portrays the man of wit a man of dubious morals. And since Johnson believed that women were more virtuous than men only because the opinion of men restrained them, he assumed that women who associated with the wits of the town could be led from innocent follies to commit indiscretions. He thought that most women, including the ones with sense, envied men their vices and their freedom.\textsuperscript{55}

The fashionable world believed in thrusting young misses early into society and so did Johnson, but for different reasons. To society, the objective was to get a husband, but to Johnson, the object was to gain knowledge, but knowledge sometimes different from that to be found in books. No one knew better than Johnson that knowledge of the world was to be gained from the world and not from books. To rear a daughter in a sheltered

\textsuperscript{54} The Rambler, No. 141, III, 182-184.

\textsuperscript{55} Boswell, op. cit., IV, 291.
existence was to make her a prey to society. The young woman who knew the world and the ways of the world would be less likely to be deceived or taken advantage of. Ignorance of the world never protected innocence. The young lady was really safer in society: "the ball, the show are not the dangerous places; no 'tis the private friend, the kind consoler, the companion of the easy vacant hour . . . he who buzzes in her ear at court, or at the opera, must be content to buzz in vain." It was for this reason that Johnson advised parents to introduce their daughter early into society. Yet he seems to have thought that thirteen, the age at which many introduced their daughters into society, was too early. Queeney Thrale was sixteen when Johnson wrote to her to "keep your eyes about you; acquaintance with the world is knowledge, and knowledge very valuable and useful."

There was, besides, another benefit from mingling in society. For, it was often through conversation alone that the young woman was able to assess what she had read. When he told Queeney to "enjoy as much of the intellectual world as you can," he did not mean by "enjoy" that she was to sit silent: "To be silent and negligent are so easy, neither can give any claim to praise. . . ." 

56 Piozzi, Anecdotes, I, 219.
58 Letters, No. 686.2, II, 381.
Johnson also thought that if the young lady was introduced early in society, she would learn early that joys anticipated were always greater than those experienced; that the joys she anticipated from adult life were not what she thought they would be. He tried to warn the young that looking at life realistically would cause them less pain. And thus, he was relieved when Queeney had, at the age of eleven, learned this lesson early.

The education which Johnson advocated for women would have provided them with the liberal education which he spoke of to Boswell. It was an education which would have made her virtuous, knowledgeable, companionable, and gracious. When Johnson created his figure of ideal womanhood, he made her the embodiment of all these qualities. It is not too extravagant a claim to make that Aspasia in his tragedy Irene is what she is because of her education.

59 The Idler, No. 80, VI, 12-16; The Rambler, No. 42, I, 270-276.

60 Letters, No. 411, II, 52. Johnson's comment on Queeney's first attendance at a regatta which had been unsuccessful: "I should not wish to have her too much pleased. It is as well for her to find out that pleasures have their pains; and that bigger misses who are at Ranelagh when she is in bed, are not so much to be envied as they would wish to be, or as they may be represented."
With one exception, Johnson's views on marriage amount to a criticism of the whole established pattern of matrimony. For, once Johnson said that the purpose of marriage was companionship and not the propagation of the species, he was considering marriage from the viewpoint of the individual's happiness and striking at the very foundation of eighteenth-century concept of marriage. To society, marriage was no more than a socially accepted institution for procreation; they cared nothing for the individual's welfare or happiness, and Johnson cared for nothing else. This one change, emphasizing the satisfaction of the man and wife in marriage, brought with it other points of contention: the role of the woman in marriage, the criteria governing the choice of mate, and the control exerted by the patriarchal system.

On one aspect only did Johnson agree with the established pattern. He may have championed the rights of the individual prior to marriage, but he considered that a man and woman, once

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1 Rasselas, Chapter XXVII, p. 564. For example, when Rasselas advocated marriage as a means for peopling the world, Nekayah, speaking for Johnson, answered: "... we are not now enquiring for the world, but for ourselves."
married, must regard the good of society before their personal inclinations. From one who set so much emphasis on satisfying the individual's needs in marriage, one might have expected Johnson to advocate eradicating many of the injustices, legal and otherwise, to which women were subjected in marriage; but he upheld the **status quo**. By law, a married woman had no rights, and Johnson thought the law, in this matter, had shown wisdom.

Johnson thought that marriage should provide a state in which two individuals could live in intimate friendship. To his way of thinking, the married state was, besides being a state natural to men, the state in which a man and woman could benefit most. No one was more aware than he that every individual needed one intimate companion with whom he could share his joys and sorrows and with whom he could while away his leisure hours in conversation or in silence. Friends were not always at a man's disposal, but a wife theoretically was. Johnson also argued for companionship in marriage on moral grounds, for he thought that, if a man was satisfied in his home, he would be less likely to seek satisfaction elsewhere. His opinion on marriage was likely also coloured by the fact that he had a positive horror of solitude, so much so that Sir

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2 *The Rambler*, No. 18, I, 121.
3 *Rasselas*, Chapter XXVIII, p. 563.
4 *Letters*, No. 61, I, 65.
5 *Boswell's Life*, II, 56.
Joshua Reynolds said that Johnson regarded any company better than no company at all. But he never advocated marriage because it solved man's universal problem of loneliness, perhaps because this solution touched him too nearly.

But society, thinking woman incapable of offering man anything other than physical satisfaction in marriage, regarded her only as a procreator of the species. She had been educated to accept this view. The education she received fitted her only for the domestic; she knew nothing of business and little of books. Nor did she consider interest in such matters a mark of femininity. As a result, a man was forced to go outside the home for diversion. Furthermore, polite society frowned upon man and wife appearing together socially so that, if the two happened to meet by accident at a social gathering, they treated each other with the indifference of strangers.

Although the majority of women accepted the customs of society, some railed against the lack of companionship in marriage, at the continual round of domestic drudgery, and the successive pregnancies. To one who did complain, Johnson in offering advice, blamed the woman: "Why how for Heaven's Sake Dearest Madam [Mrs. Thrale] should any Man delight in a Wife that is to him neither Use nor Ornament? He cannot talk to you

6 Sir Joshua Reynolds, Portraits, p. 76.

7 Connoisseur, No. 7, I, 31. Since this is an ironic essay, it is difficult to know how seriously to take this comment.
about his Business, which you do not understand; nor about his Pleasures which you do not partake; if you have Wit or Beauty you shew them nowhere, so that he has none of the Reputation; if you have Economy or Understanding you employ neither in Attention to his Property. You divide your Time between your Mamma & your babies, & wonder you do not by that means become agreeable to your Husband. This was so plain I could not fail to comprehend it. . . .nu

Johnson never advocated marriage on the grounds that it was an institution for the rearing of children because he did not think that the woman's role in marriage was to act primarily as a mother. Her role as a companion to her husband was of far greater importance. His attitude toward children in marriage may have been greatly influenced by his own home. He told Mrs. Thrale that he and his brother, Nathaniel, were ever vying for his mother's affections. He expressed the same opinion in his works: children were only an added source of discord in marriage; in a family, a child rebelled against parental authority or vied with his brethren for the affections of his parents. Or controversies arose because parents could not agree how their children, particularly their daughters, should be educated. And as the offspring matured, new problems arose; a daughter entering womanhood clashed with a

8 Piozzi, Thraliana, I, 309. [1764 January.]
9 Piozzi, Anecdotes, I, 150-151.
10 The Rambler, No. 84, II, 175-181; Piozzi, op. cit., I, 250.
mother who was unwilling to "cease to be a girl," or a son reached manhood before his father was willing to relinquish it. The solution, in the early years, was simple: "Put missey to school," said Johnson.

In this matter, his attitude may also have been influenced by the fact that Johnson did not seem to have been particularly fond of children. He told Boswell that he never wanted a child of his own and that, had he had one, he would not have had much fondness for it. Yet in his Life of Johnson, Boswell said Johnson loved children. But Mrs. Thrale tells a different tale. Perhaps Boswell was misled because Johnson was "extremely indulgent to children, not because he lov'd them, for he loved them not, but because he feared extremely to disoblige them: a child says he is capable of resentment much earlier than is commonly suppos'd." Boswell likely assumed that, because he loved a particular child, such as Queeney Thrale, whom he regarded as his own child, he loved all children. But

12 The Rambler, No. 55, II, 7; see also Rasselas, Chapter XXIX, p. 565.
13 Rasselas, loc. cit.
14 Piozzi, op. cit., I, 251.
16 Boswell, Life, IV, 126.
17 Piozzi, Thraliana, I, 191. See also Anecdotes, I, 159.
18 Letters, No. 748, II, 448.
this would be the same as assuming that Johnson respected all women because he had the highest regard for a few, such as Mrs. Thrale, Molly Aston, Hill Boothby, Frances Reynolds, and Fanny Burney.

What society regarded as the basis for a good marriage, Johnson thought a senseless criterion because he considered happiness more important than social position. Society regarded fortune, beauty, and coquetry, which it mistook for femininity, as desirable in a wife. Johnson tried to re-educate the public—or rather inform them of what they already knew but ignored—that a more foolish basis for a successful marriage could not be found. Everyone was aware that money often caused more discord than harmony in marriage; that beauty faded and coquetry cloyed. If more had followed Dr. Primrose's example and chosen a wife as Mrs. Primrose did her wedding gown, "not for a fine glossy surface, but such qualities as would wear well," their chances of happiness would have been greater.

Although Johnson regarded many virtues and qualities desirable in a mate, he regarded two as paramount: piety and virtue. The lack of these he considered disastrous to any union. He urged women to choose men who had sense and understanding, and men to choose women who were good-natured. Their

20 *The Rambler*, No. 197, IV, 146.
chances of compatibility would be even greater if they had similar interests and a similar socio-economic background. They would also be better companions if both had spent their leisure hours reading, for then they would not be driven into company or forced to rely solely on amusements for diversion. These last two factors Johnson thought most important, perhaps because he had been made aware, in his own home, that his mother and father would have been better companions had she not been able to twit her husband about her superior ancestry and wealthier relations and had she been more literate.

However, Johnson never meant that a man and a woman were to apply reason strictly to the selection of a mate and choose one who possessed the qualities common sense dictated as desirable. He believed a marriage should be contracted on the basis of common sense and prudence, but one contracted without esteem, if it produced peace and harmony in a household, offered little satisfaction to either partner. Rambler No. 35 is a warning from a young man who totally disregarded his feelings and married a girl for whom he had no affection because he

21 The Rambler, No. 167, III, 337-341; see also The Idler, No. 15, V, 115-118; No. 28, V, 163-167.

22 The Rambler, loc. cit.


24 The Idler, No. 100, VI, 83-87.
was "unwilling to lose credit by marrying for love."²⁵

Passionate love was one motive which everyone, Johnson included, regarded as the weakest basis for marriage.²⁶ Love would hardly be considered by eighteenth-century society as the basis for a wise marriage; no one subscribed to the popular, modern concept that certain men and women were made for each other and that neither could be happy if either failed to marry his counterpart. Johnson's reply to Boswell's comment that a man might be happy with one of fifty women: "'Ay, Sir, fifty thousand"²⁷ is characteristic of the thinking of the age. Johnson thought too much love undesirable in marriage: "too much love in marriage does as much mischief . . . as too little:—marriage is more a League at last of Friendship than of Love."²⁸ Yet he never went so far as Mrs. Montagu did and called a love-match madness,²⁹ but he did term it a sign of weakness in a man. Invariably he represented those who said they loved as self-deluded creatures, who, because they had been charmed by women at assemblies, thought they loved. Had they tested the depth of their love, they would have found that it only amounted to a passing fancy.³⁰

²⁵ The Rambler, No. 35, I, 230.
²⁶ Boswell, Private Papers, XI, 245.
²⁷ Boswell's Life, II, 461.
²⁸ Piozzi, Thraliana, I, 224.
³⁰ The Rambler, No. 34, I, 220-225.
Johnson never expressed in his writings anything to contradict his view about marrying for love, but his actions and his conversation are a contradiction of what he wrote. But this is typical enough, for what a man writes and what he does and says are often at odds, particularly with regard to women. He failed to take his own advice and married for that very same reason which he warned men against. He was known, in conversation, to have expatiated on love like any romantic. He warned one young lady "not to ridicule a passion which he who never felt never was happy." 31 But the contradiction is understandable; the essays are the voice of a detached Johnson speaking from the mind and warning men and women to look upon their prospective mates with greater objectivity. He never underestimated the power of love: "nothing," he said, "so seduces the reason from vigilance. . . ." 32 It is not from reason and prudence that people marry but from inclination." 33 He knew that few would heed his advice, and this was all the more reason why he should keep warning them in his writings.

Everyone was aware that for a woman everything — her happiness as well as her economic security — depended on the choice of a mate. Society was more interested in the getting

31 Piozzi, Anecdotes, I, 290.
32 Boswell, op. cit., I, 381-382.
33 Ibid., II, 101.
married, and Johnson in impressing upon young women that the very permanency of the relationship demanded that they make a wise choice. For, if a woman was unhappy in her marriage, the best she could do was to find solace in Johnson's dictum: "Human life is everywhere a state in which much is to be endured, and little enjoyed." She must make the best of the situation. Johnson gave women the same advice that Sir George Savile had given his daughter at the beginning of the century: "Be content." She had to be, for as a married woman she had no legal right, nor any means of legal redress. Nor did Johnson think she should have recourse to the law to right any injustice which she might have to endure: "Nature has given women so much power that the law has very wisely given them little." He said that "women have all the liberty they should wish to have." And the majority of women would have agreed with him. Such a judgment seems odd, for there were times when disaster in a family might have been averted if the wife had had recourse to the law. Everyone was aware that a husband could waste his wife's patrimony and even ruin his family financially through

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34 Rasselas, Chapter XI, p. 531.
35 Ibid., Chapter XXIX, p. 567.
37 Boswell, op. cit., III, 286.
38 Hannah More considered all talk of woman's rights fantastic and absurd: "I have as much liberty as I can make use of, now I am an old maid and when I was a young one, I dare say more than was good for me." Durant's Supplement to Memoirs, p. 216, cited from R. M. Wardley, Mary Wollstonecraft (London, 1951), p. 139.
profligacy and she was powerless to prevent him. For, once married, she relinquished the property rights she had enjoyed as a single woman, and everything she owned, her property and jewels and any money she might inherit, passed into the absolute control of her husband. If her husband squandered her substance or invested it unwisely, the only thing she could do was to get a male relative or friend to intercede for her. Johnson knew just how effective such intercessions could be. Once he had interceded on behalf of Mrs. Thrale in a matter which was of no disastrous consequence and been unsuccessful. But Johnson would have upheld a husband's control, for he believed that, since men mingled in the world more than women and had greater experience in business, they were wiser.

But if a woman's unhappiness stemmed from her husband's infidelity, she got very little sympathy from man or woman. Society, with the exception of the clergy, accepted the double standard of moral behaviour. Even Johnson, moralist as he was,


40 Allowing for Mrs. Thrale's exaggeration that she was without a friend, she did say: "... with Mr. Thrale I was ever cautious of contending conscious that a Misunderstanding there could never answer; as I have no Friend or Relation in the World to protect me from the rough Treatment of a Husband shou'd he chuse to exert his Prerogatives." Thraliana, I, 43.

41 Ibid., I, 222, n.2. The cutting of the forest at Bach-y-Craig, Mrs. Thrale's Welsh estate.

42 Boswell, op. cit., II, 76.
not only accepted the double standard but thought that a woman should show no resentment if her husband was unfaithful to her out of wanton appetite, provided that he did not insult her.\textsuperscript{43} Although he regarded profligacy as natural in men, he did not condone profligacy, for he believed it as criminal in the sight of God. For one so rigid in his own morals, he had unbounded leniency for the vices of other men. His attitude was, no doubt, based on the fact that he did not judge a man by his morals as he did a woman by hers: "Vice does not hurt a man's character."\textsuperscript{45} It is difficult to reconcile by logic how a man could say "you don't call a man a whoremonger for getting one wench with child"\textsuperscript{46} and then call a woman a whore for one instance of unchastity, but Johnson did.\textsuperscript{47} He believed that a woman who would not hold to the principle of chastity would hold to no principles.\textsuperscript{48} Strange as it may seem, Johnson did not base his argument against unchastity in wives on a moral issue. He argued that adultery was more criminal in a woman than in a man because all property rights depended on the fidelity of wives.\textsuperscript{49}


\textsuperscript{44} \textit{Boswell's Life}, III, 407.

\textsuperscript{45} \textit{Ibid.}, III, 349. \hfill \textsuperscript{46} \textit{Ibid.}, II, 172.

\textsuperscript{47} \textit{Ibid.}, II, 246.


If Johnson regarded profligacy in a husband no cause for resentment in a wife, he would obviously not regard it as grounds for separation. Johnson said that, had he had a daughter, he would not have accepted her in his own home if she ran away because her husband had been unfaithful. Johnson blamed the woman rather than the husband, who, he said, had probably been provoked to turn to a mistress when his wife had been negligent in pleasing him. Only if discord in a marriage arose from incompatibility of their natures, did Johnson think separation was warranted.

Like everyone else, Johnson placed the onus for making the marriage successful on the woman. Mrs. Thrale complained that in disputes between husband and wife, Johnson took the husband's part. And, in general, he seems to have done so. When the Reverend Doctor John Taylor wrote to Johnson asking his advice, after informing him that his wife had left him, Johnson replied: "preserve your peace of mind;" the loss of which is a "greater evil than a disobedient wife. . . . Forbear all pursuit, . . . wear an air of indifference, and calmly wait." Elsewhere, Johnson had written that nothing was worth the price of complaisance.

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51 *Letters*, No. 161, I, 163.
52 Ibid., No. 157, I, 158.
53 Ibid., No. 156, I, 156.
Whatever the source of discord was in a marriage, divorce was, to Johnson, out of the question, even for a man. In theory, society did think that a man should be able to divorce his wife for infidelity, but even the wealthy found divorces difficult to procure because the Church Courts controlled all divorce action. But Johnson's position was one to be expected from a high churchman. Marriage was a vow made before God, and therefore binding. Furthermore, he believed, like his countrymen, that it was the good of society, not that of the individual, which was to be considered.

If the patriarchal system had shown many signs of breaking down in the eighteenth century, patriarchal authority in marriage must have been exercised to some degree at least, for Johnson and so many of his contemporaries—Joseph Addison, Richard Steele, Samuel Richardson (Clarissa Harlowe), and Henry Fielding (Tom Jones) had criticized its authority. Johnson thought as they did: that no adult should be forced by his parent against his will in so personal and important a matter as marriage. And furthermore, he seriously doubted that parents were qualified to make a wise choice for their children. Any parent who did force his son or daughter against his or her will

55 Mitchell and Leyes, p. 500.
56 *Boswell's Life*, III, 25.
57 See Chapter I, page 12, n. 30 and 31.
was not exercising parental authority but infringing on another individual's rights. Marriage was a contract between a man and a woman and not between a man and woman and their families. Since so much of the happiness of either individual depended on the choice of a mate, no one ought to allow another to choose for him.\textsuperscript{59} And because the basis of the choice was to be made, according to Johnson, on mutual regard and esteem,\textsuperscript{60} it was impossible for a third person to make the choice.

In some ways, Johnson regarded parents as the least qualified of anyone to make the choice. From his observations, he had not come to the conclusion that parents were wiser than their children and thus better qualified to make a sounder decision. But he had observed that parents contracted marriages for their children on the basis of financial advantage with no consideration for the personal inclinations of the couple or of the possibility of compatibility between them.\textsuperscript{61} They put social position before happiness, knowing full well that the prospect of happiness in a marriage contracted solely on the basis of

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59 \textit{The Rambler}, No. 115, III, 15.

60 \textit{Loc. cit.}

61 The publication, in 1742, of one cynical pamphlet entitled \textit{A Master Key to the rich Ladies' Treasury: or the Widowers' and Batchelors' directory containing an exact alphabetical List of the Duchess, Marchioness, Countess, Viscountess, and Baroness Dowagers; Ladies by Curtesie, Daughters of Peers, Baronets' Widows, Widows and Spinsters in Great Britain, with an Account of their Places of Abode, reputed Fortunes, and Fortunes they possess in the Stocks, by a Younger Brother}, gives some idea to what proportions fortune hunting had reached. Mitchell and Leyes, p. 497.
\end{flushright}
fortune was slim and that only moral character, understanding, mutual respect, and common interests offered any hope of an enduring and satisfying relationship. Nor would any parent who had any sense put his daughter, as so many did, at a disadvantage prior to the marriage settlement by making her feel that she was being sold to the highest bidder. It vexed Johnson to know that young women were robbed of self-respect and dignity by being forced to play their "airs" like trick dogs before young gentlemen of fortune. They were, he said, placed in a position "not much different from prostitution. . . . I could not but look with pity on young persons condemned to be set to auction; and made cheap by injudicious commendations; for how could they know themselves offered and rejected a hundred times, without some loss of that soft elevation and maiden dignity, as necessary to the completion of female excellence?"  

In their eagerness to marry off their daughters well, parents flung aside every vestige of moral integrity. To negotiate a good match, they lied and cheated in marriage settlement, knowing that their daughters would later suffer for the deception. They also taught their daughters to conceal their real natures during courtship so that after marriage the man often thought his

62 The Rambler, No. 35, I, 228-229. See also The Idler, No. 42, V, 221.

63 Ibid., No. 119, III, 46.
wife had undergone a transformation of character. In Rambler No. 167 and elsewhere, Johnson emphasized that there must be complete confidence between the man and woman, and absolute openness in the negotiation of the marriage settlement, and no wilful attempt on either part to deceive the other of his real nature. Irrespective of moral integrity, from a common sense point of view, his advice was sound, and one would think so sensible that there would be no need to write of it, for all would realize that the price of concealment was invariably misery. Yet there were books, notably Dr. John Gregory's Father's Legacy to His Daughters (1774), which sold by the thousands, that actually advised women to dissemble.

But nothing was more offensive to Johnson than society's debasement of marriage to the state of a financial bargain. Society put marriage firmly on an economic basis; men and women were pawns in a matrimonial chess game. On moral grounds he could not condone the behaviour of parents who had debased marriage to the extent that it had become more like a slave auction than an institution which man, supposedly civilized, had instituted to foster dignity in society. The number of essays Johnson devoted to fortune hunting through marriage and to the preoccupation of his age with money clearly indicates his disapproval of

64 The Rambler, No. 45, I, 295.
65 Loc. cit.
judging everything in life by its materialistic value. Johnson did say — and in this respect he agreed with his age — that it was a "perversion" for a woman to marry beneath her. But saying this is very different from saying, as society did, that the basis of choice of a mate was the man or woman who had the largest fortune. Parents educated their daughters to regard the wealthy marriage a wise marriage. And young women got no better advice from their friends, for they, too, regarded it a disgrace if a woman did not make the very best financial match she was able: "Money was a sufficient compensation" for any deficiencies — defective ancestry, character, or disparity of age.

To Johnson's way of thinking, marriage had, in other ways, become an undignified affair. The selection of a mate was no longer, at least in polite society, a private matter, carried on in a quiet and dignified fashion. Marriageable women and eligible bachelors were plagued by the idle polite who had taken up matchmaking as a pastime. These "matrimonial salesmen" as Hymenaeus called them gained nothing from matchmaking, but it did provide them with topics for gossip. They exercised no discretion but bandied about the reasons why this young lady had been found unsuitable, or why that young man had been refused. Hymenaeus, speaking for Johnson, likened them to "vultures" who contended for a carcass.68

66 Boswell, op. cit., II, 328-329.
67 The Adventurer, No. 74, 288.
68 The Rambler, No. 115, III, 15.
If, in theory, Johnson believed that a woman should choose her own mate, he had little hope that such a scheme would work in practice. He had little faith that women would use sense and make a wise choice. They would, like their parents, make fortune, not virtue, the basis of their choice. If they were set at liberty and allowed to choose for themselves, he thought that, after wasting time flitting from diversion to diversion without gaining experience, they would finally choose a mate from motives "trifling as those of a girl or mercenary as a miser." Once in conversation, he expressed a harsher opinion: "ladies set no value on moral character of men who pay addresses to them"; even a good woman "who says her prayers three times a day" preferred the profligate to an honest man if the former had threepence more. Johnson is reported to have said that the solution lay in having the Lord Chancellor act as matchmaker "upon due consideration of character and circumstances without the parties having any choice in the matter." Yet Johnson knew that a marriage bureau was not the answer either because he was aware that marriages contracted from reason did not guarantee happiness: "There are a thousand familiar disputes which reason never can decide: questions which elude investigation, and make logick ridiculous... Consider the state of mankind, and enquire

69 *The Rambler*, No. 39, I, 255.
70 *Boswell, op. cit.*, IV, 291.
how few can be supposed to act upon any occasions . . . with all the reasons of action present in their minds."  

If the individual was to make the choice, early marriages were out of the question. Johnson did not think that young ladies of fifteen or eighteen had reached the years of discretion which would enable them to exercise judgment and prudence in choosing a mate. Nothing but disappointment and regret could, he said, be expected of marriages made "in the immaturity of youth, in the ardour of desire, without judgment, without foresight, without enquiry after conformity of opinions, similarity of manners, rectitude of judgment, or purity of sentiment."  

He seems to have regarded the late twenties as the best time for marriage. The mature woman had, or at least should have, a more realistic conception of marriage and should not expect "felicity which human power cannot bestow," or "perfection which human virtue cannot attain."

Thus far, Johnson's individualistic views on marriage have been considered almost entirely from the point of view of the satisfaction the individual could receive by his pursuit of happiness through a wise marriage. But there is a corollary which is just as important. By associating closely with another, 

72 *Rasselas*, Chapter XXIX, pp. 566-567.
the individual himself should become, through association, a better human being. Johnson's argument against celibacy shows why he thought marriage was the best state for man: "to live without feeling or exciting sympathy, to be fortunate without adding to the felicity of others, or afflicted without tasting the balm of pity is a state more gloomy than solitude; it is not a retreat, but an exclusion from mankind."\(^{76}\)

\[\text{76 Rasselas, Chapter XXVI, p. 560.}\]
Chapter IV

FIGURE OF THE ESTIMABLE WOMAN FROM HIS WORKS

The figure of the estimable woman which Johnson presents in his works is really a composite image. He took what he considered the best from all possible worlds: the elegance and breeding of the fashionable world without its affectation and foibles, the Puritan morality of eighteenth-century middle class society, and the temperament of an ideal being. Once he had endowed her with beauty, Johnson's idea of womanhood would have been really no different from any other idealization of woman. There was nothing novel in equating beauty, high birth, and goodness — such heroines were to be found in romances and in novels of the mid-eighteenth century. Henry Fielding's Sophia Western and Samuel Richardson's Clarissa Harlowe are the embodiments of these same qualities. Yet Johnson's figure of the estimable woman is, in one sense, unique. To present woman as a creature of marked intellect and to approve of her love of argument and discussion was indeed novel. If a woman was able to converse on religious, philosophic, or scientific topics — this society thought it best for her to conceal and even taught her to do so. Fielding's Sophia Western, who was intelligent and reasonably well educated, was, like the 1 child, seen and not heard in intellectual discussions.

To label Johnson's figure of woman as fundamentally a typical middle class image is to present a neatly wrapped and neatly tied package. But how much is his image the product of a middle class background, and how much is due to the man himself? It is true that he had the bourgeois admiration of the ease and elegance of the aristocracy and held the opinion, like any middle class man from the provinces, that women of gentle birth were more virtuous than those beneath them in the social echelon. The strict moral code that he attributed to his ideal woman in Irene definitely stemmed from Puritan middle class morality. But it is also true that his female characters possess many of the characteristics the man Johnson admired in women. It is a known fact that he was ever a fond admirer of a pretty woman if she was intelligent and had an abundance of common sense; if she had spirit; if she was a good conversationalist. Mention here of a minor detail may serve to focus attention on the possible danger of labels. Was Demetrius' cavalier attitude to Aspasia the result of his creator's middle class background? Or can it be better explained by the fact that Johnson's respect for women accounts for his behaviour toward women he admired being "en cavalier"?

2 Mitchell and Leyes, p. 384.

Whichever the case may be, Johnson made Aspasia, in his tragedy *Irene*, the embodiment of all those qualities that he admired in woman. Although the purpose of *Irene* and *Rasselas* differs — the first is purely moralistic whereas the second tends to be philosophic — the Princess Nekayah and the lady Pekuah are really facets of his ideal woman. Besides having many qualities in common, all three — Aspasia, Nekayah, and Pekuah — have certain characteristics in common. They are conglomerations of virtues, not characters, nor are they even type characters, as idealized figures often become. Nor are they womanly; they neither act nor respond in any way which is characteristically feminine. As a matter of fact, with the exception of the lady Pekuah, they can hardly be said to act or respond at all. This is true even of Aspasia. For, though one is told of her goodness and of her womanly charms, yet to be told and to be convinced that she is so, are quite different matters. Johnson's women range from neuter to masculine and to the borders of femininity. They are beings in limbo, not solely because Johnson created veritable paragons of virtue, nor because he delineated his characters according to the neo-classical literary tradition, but because he failed, when he endowed them with minds, to provide them with hearts.

Although two of the women, Aspasia and Nekayah, whom Johnson set forth as models for admiration, are women of high birth, they possess none of the accomplishments of the fashionable woman which Pope criticized in *The Rape of the Lock*. They are products of a Johnsonian educational scheme and know nothing of
the so-called graces of the fashionable woman. Their whole being is not oriented to this world but to the next. Irene, the only one of Johnson's women whose interest lay in this world, paid for her interest with her life. His other women, Aspasia, Nekayah, and Pekuah, either govern their lives or come to the conclusion that "the utmost excellence at which humanity can arrive, is a constant and determinate pursuit of virtue, without regard to present dangers or advantage; a continual reference to every action to the divine will; and an unvaried elevation of the intellectual eye to reward which perseverance only can attain."⁴ In the concluding chapters of Rasselas, Nekayah, like the Preacher of Ecclesiastes, considers all is vanity; placing one's hopes in what was earthly, as Irene did, was doomed: "I hope hereafter [said Nekayah] to think only on the choice of eternity."⁵ And Pekuah, disillusioned with the world, comes to the conclusion that the only hope of happiness lay in founding a convent and passing her days there in meditation.⁶ But the working out of this idea, whereby man is to keep his eye fixed on the eternal, is not to be seen in detail in Johnson's Rasselas but in his tragedy, Irene.

Of all the qualities to be admired in a woman, one would have expected a moralist of the middle class to have chosen

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⁴ The Rambler, No. 185, IV, 83-84.
⁵ Chapter XLVIII, p. 611.
⁶ Chapter XLIX, p. 611.
virtue. But to Johnson, it was piety that was the key to a woman's worth, for he thought that only those women who had a firm grasp of religious principles ever tended to retain their virtue. In this respect Johnson went further than his contemporaries, Richardson and Fielding, who assumed a relationship between piety and virtue, for Johnson took the extreme and illogical position of actually equating piety and virtue; without the first, the second could not exist. And when Johnson spoke of virtue as a measure of a woman's worth, it is clear, both from what he said and what he wrote, that he was often speaking of virtue in its narrowest sense, that of chastity. Once a woman's religious scruples were weakened, Johnson regarded that woman as lost. Her virtue was then assailable, for pride "was able to make but a weak defence . . . the love of pleasure is too strongly implanted in the female breast, to suffer them scrupulously to examine the validity of arguments designed to weaken restraint; all are easily led to believe, that whatever thwarts their inclinations must be wrong." But there was more to this than just the "ruined" woman. If a woman succumbed and did not hold to this one principle, Johnson believed she would hold to no principles but gave up "every notion of female honour and virtue." This view of morality and the idea that all one's actions must be governed by "a continual reference . . . to divine will" are the crux of

7 Adventurer, No. 34, IV, 219.

8 Boswell, Private Papers, VII, 179.
Johnson's *Irene*. In *Irene*, Johnson equates piety, chastity, and all other virtues. To save her life, Irene was willing first to relinquish her faith, then her virtue, and finally to betray her friends in the hope that she would ingratiate herself in Mahomet's favour. Aspasia had warned her that apostasy was only the beginning.

Thy Soul once tainted with so foul a Crime, 9
No more shall glow with Friendship's hallow'd Ardour:

Because of her fear of death, Irene tried to compromise. In an effort to save her life, she lost it. But not the noble Aspasia. She will sacrifice nothing — neither her faith, nor her virtue, either in the narrow or broader sense. All things fall to Aspasia: peace of mind, honour, happiness, love, and for these, she was willing to relinquish everything on which society set store — rank, position, and wealth. To Johnson, nobility of character was the criterion of a woman's worth, not ancestry and acreage, as the genteel thought, nor coin which was the yardstick of the middle class.

What Johnson expected of virtue in woman exceeded all bounds of probability. The women in Johnson's works are the best natured and the most amiable creatures in the world: they are guileless, good-humoured, and possess every other virtue one can think of. In *Irene*, he set out to make Aspasia the ideal woman, and, therefore, made her a model of perfection and a paragon of virtues. But to Nekayah and Pekuah, who were

9 III. VIII. 15-16.
not meant to be models of perfection, he allowed little in the way of weakness. And such weaknesses as he did endow them with are insignificant in nature. Their day-dreams of grandeur and benevolence amount to nothing, for they realize only too well that it is reality with which they must cope. Once they laugh at the eccentric notions of the mad astronomer and are chastened by Imlac; their remorse is immediate. The lady Pekuah learned to conquer her one outstanding weakness which was a foolish fear of the unknown. This proneness that women had for foolish fears seemed to have been something of a "hobby horse" with Johnson, for he vented his disapproval in Rasselas, in Irene,¹⁰ and in Rambler, No. 34.¹¹ More than likely Johnson wanted to say something against the current practice of encouraging young girls to counterfeit fear in order to flatter male vanity. Such hypocrisy Johnson could not tolerate; complete openness was what he admired. There is not a trace of deceit to be found in Aspasia or Nekayah, and Pekuah can be accused of deceit on one occasion only: when she contemplates deceiving the mad astronomer of the extent of her knowledge of astronomy.

The one quality which distinguishes the women in Johnson's works is their intellect. It is not that they say anything which is particularly profound, but their mode of expression gives profundity to their ideas. They do not sit

¹⁰  II. 1.26-33.
¹¹  The Rambler, No. 34, I, 220-225.
back and expect men to tell them what to think, as Swift had advised in "A Letter to a Very Young Lady on Her Marriage." Although one has no specific evidence how they were educated, one can surmise that their education has been one of book learning. They have read and are able to judge of things for themselves and take part in discussions without fear of condescension and without fear of being regarded as presumptuous. Rasselas listened with care to Nekayah's observations on private life; the mad astronomer was eager to engage Pekuah in conversation; Demetrius showed unbounded admiration for Aspasia's intellect.

These women of intellect that Johnson created are all ruled by reason, not emotion. Aspasia cannot be led by desire or fear to seek ambition, power, or glory, or to turn from the way of life which reason dictates. When Irene contemplates the good she will do with the power conferred on her as Queen, Aspasia warns her that she is really only deluding herself by imagining grandeur and power "that shrinks from Reason's powerful Voice."¹² The Princess Nekayah and Pekuah are, it is true, not completely governed by reason, yet they can both be called reasonable creatures. After the loss of Pekuah, Nekayah promised Imlac and Rasselas that she would wait a year before carrying out her resolution to retire into a monastery because she considered their demand "reasonable."¹³ Instead of giving

¹² III. VIII. 126.
¹³ Chapter XXXV, p. 579.
way to emotional outbursts as her maids did, Pekuah decided to make the best of her predicament and spend her time in captivity usefully: "sullenness and resentment would have been no use." Since she had an opportunity to learn all the desert baron could teach her about astronomy, she did not pass up the chance.

If Johnson created women who were interested in knowledge and who were governed by reason, it was not his intention to create the purely intellectual type of woman, nor was it his intention to create the stoical type, for he admired neither species. Hymenaeus could not bring himself to marry a purely intellectual woman because he could not face marriage with Ideas and not with a woman. Johnson's opinion of Stoics is plain enough in Chapter XVII of Rasselas. The Stoic only deluded himself that he could live unaffected by life; as Imlac said, he may discourse "like an angel" but he lived "like other men." Yet when one examines Johnson's female creations, it seems that he created what he never intended to create. Two of his women, Aspasia and Nekayah, are engrossed with ideas and principles more than they are with people. However, none of his women are Stoics because Stoicism presupposes a control of emotions and Johnson's women are creatures who experience little real emotion. It is certain that Johnson intended to make Aspasia, if not Nekayah and Pekuah, womanly; yet she

14 Chapter XXIX, p. 586.
15 The Rambler, No. 113, III, 4.
seems, in many ways, a masculine and Amazonian type of woman, despite the fact that Johnson tried to guard against the latter.

The criticism Johnson made of Joseph Addison's *Cato*, if applied to Johnson's own female characters, might, in part, offer an explanation why Johnson's women are minds only, and wooden and unwomanly.

It is rather a poem in dialogue than a drama, rather a succession of just sentiments in elegant language, than a representation of natural affections, or any state probable or possible in human life. Nothing here excites or assuages emotion. . . . Of the agents we have little care: we consider not what they are doing, or what they are suffering: we wish only to know what they have to say. *Cato* is a being above our solicitude: a man of whom the gods take care, and whom we leave to their care with heedless confidence.16

Johnson's creative ability did not lie in the delineation of character outside the compass of a biographer. He was a man of ideas but one who could not fuse ideas and individual qualities and so create a life-like being. The ideas, religious, philosophic, and moral, predominate. His women are women with minds and little, if any, heart. Of the three women who are without any serious moral taint, Nekayah is the most wooden; Aspasia, his ideal woman, is, if anything, more masculine than feminine, and Pekuah is the most life-like and the most feminine, since Johnson used her seldom as a vehicle for his own weighty comments.

Nekayah is merely a voice, or rather a mouthpiece expressing Johnson's views on life. Johnson made no attempt to

make her appear womanly. Not once does he give any hint of her appearance; physically she is a total blur. The only thing feminine about her is her name. And even her name, like Pekuah's, is so fanciful that it does nothing to establish her as a character. In the debate on marriage, she does not even give the feminine point of view, as one would expect; her function is to provide another voice to advance the philosophical argument. For the sake of variety Johnson made one voice feminine and one masculine. But this is only a thin disguise, for the discussions between Nekayah and Rasselas are obviously Johnson debating with himself.

Had Johnson made Nekayah a vehicle for his ideas and been able, at the same time, to involve her emotionally with another individual in the tale, she might have come to life. But as it is, she stands apart, a detached emotionless spectator. One is told of her devotion to her lady-in-waiting, yet Johnson made no attempt to show the development or the state of their relationship until Pekuah's capture in chapter thirty-three. By this time it is too late. The reader has already formed his concept of Nekayah; from her, he expects to glean what Johnson thought of man's hope for happiness and not what was the state of Nekayah's heart. Nor is Johnson particularly interested in revealing her emotional state in anything like a realistic way, for he dismissed her grief at the loss of Pekuah

17 Perhaps her comment on reason could be considered characteristically feminine. Chapter XXIX, pp. 566-567.
with "The princess was overwhelmed with surprise and grief."
The reader is more interested in shifting his attentions to Pekuah's fate than in listening to Nekayah's self-reproaches, which, couched in the most unemotional language possible, fail to rouse the reader's emotion: "'Had not my fondness, said she, lessened my authority, Pekuah had not dared to talk of her terroirs. She ought to have feared me more than spectres. A severe look would have overpowered her; a peremptory command would have compelled her to obedience. Why did foolish indulgence prevail upon me? Why did I not speak and refuse to hear?'''

The fact that Nekayah has for thirty chapters been engrossed with ideas—which is, in itself, unlikely—and then for five chapters bewails the loss of her favourite only makes Nekayah less convincing. If she had been a character, one could have accepted this contrariety in her nature. But the reader loses patience with Nekayah as a character when this same Nekayah, who has been, for the greater part of the tale, one of the oracles of wisdom, expresses sentiments as puerile as this:

'The time is near at hand, when none shall be disturbed any longer by the sighs of Nekayah: my search after happiness is now at an end. I am resolved to retire from the world with all its flatteries and deceits, and will hide myself in solitude, without any other care than to compose my thoughts, and regulate my hours by a constant succession of innocent occupations, till with a mind purified from all earthly desires. . . .'  

18 Chapter XXXIV, pp. 575-576.
19 Chapter XXXV, p. 578.
Expressions of self-pity are characteristically human, but here they are not in keeping with the concept Johnson had earlier created of Nekayah. Of course, Johnson was not concerned with inconsistencies of character; he wanted the idea, for it gave him an opportunity later on to continue his argument against denouncing the world and embracing the monastic life.

Yet, in fairness, one cannot criticize a man for not doing what he never intended to do. Johnson's purpose may have been to set down his thoughts on life and, instead of writing a series of short essays as he had done in his *Rambler*, *Idler*, and *Adventurer*, to use the Oriental tale to provide continuity. He made no pretentious claims for *Rasselas*; writing to Lucy Porter, he referred to it as a "little story book." But whatever Johnson set out to do and whether he succeeded or not, is of no consequence; he produced one of the most readable and most delightful books in the English language—characters or no. For one reads *Rasselas*, not for its characters, but with the hope of coming to some understanding of a great man's mind. Although the tale has, by many, been considered as one of the gloomiest pictures of life, it is not lacking in humour.

But in the case of his tragedy, *Irene*, no such allowances can be made, for interplay between characters is the heart of drama. There are entire scenes in *Irene*, particularly those between Aspasia and Irene, in which Aspasia "talks at"

20 *Letters*, No. 130, I, 122; In No. 124, I, 121, he called *Rasselas* "a thing."
Irene with the cold voice of Reason. Aspasia is in no way emotionally involved in Irene's distress. She does not try to influence Irene out of interest for her friend; she is only concerned that Irene do what is morally right. Examples could be multiplied, but one will suffice:

Irene: If, when Religion prompts me to refuse, The Dread of Instant Death restrains my tongue?

Aspasia: Reflect that Life like ev'ry other Blessing, Derives its Value from its Use alone; Not for itself but for a nobler End Th' Eternal gave it, and that End is Virtue.

And Virtue cheaply sav'd with loss of Life.

Johnson certainly endowed Aspasia with a religious fervour, but her emotional response is to an idea, not to an individual. Even when Irene taunted Aspasia that the rewards of virtue provided, at the best, a gloomy happiness, Aspasia did not rise to the bait, but unemotionally and tenaciously holding to her principles, answered: "That none are great, or happy but the Virtuous." Emotionally, Aspasia is not far from being dead.

On at least three occasions, Johnson failed to utilize situations which would have brought Aspasia to life and would have, at the same time, made her appear womanly. But Johnson reported Aspasia's reactions to Mahomet's profession of love,

21 III. VIII. 24-35.
22 Ibid., 98-102.
23 III. IX. 8.
and he also reported her outrage upon hearing of Abdalla's affection and thereby lost two excellent opportunities of showing emotional by-play between the characters. It appears as if Johnson did not want to handle scenes of emotion. One scene—the one probably destined to be the love scene of the play [Act III.X] that would have helped immeasurably to make her womanly—does not "come off." Aspasia speaks as if she learned the lines, as if she loved by rote. And Demetrius expresses his love by exclamations and questions, which do little to convince:

Such Ecstasy of Love! such pure Affection,
What Worth can merit? or what Faith reward? 24

Furthermore, as if ill at ease in the situation, Johnson broke off the scene by having Demetrius and Aspasia recount their adventures.

And although it could not be so, it seems as if Johnson set out to deprive Aspasia of a heart. In creating his ideal woman, he reduced the emotional interplay between her and the other characters still further by placing Aspasia on a pedestal. By endowing her with all the graces, he deprived her of life. She is the nonpareille, and Johnson never lets the reader forget this. Four of the dramatis personae adore her. Even the sensual Mahomet, who first loved her for her beauty, came to recognize her worth, for, when he has gained Irene, he realized that,

24 III.X. 15-16.
beside Aspasia, she was a poor second:

If thou art more than the gay Dream of Fancy,  
More than a pleasing Sound without a Meaning,  
O Happiness! sure thou art all ASPASIA'S.  

To Demetrius, her male counterpart, she is the

Propitious Guide of my bewilder'd Soul  
Calm of my Cares, and Guardian of my Virtue. 

But he loves her, not for her beauty, although he is not unaware of her physical charms, but for her piety and virtue. But she appeals not only to the licentious Mahomet and to the noble Demetrius but also to the treacherous Abdalla, who is willing to relinquish all his ambitions to possess her. Aspasia has, then, been endowed with a kind of beauty that is physical and ethereal, the different aspects of which appeal to three different types of men. But she appeals not only to men: Irene idolizes her for her virtue, for her courage and steadfastness in every adversity, and for her superior intellect.

If Johnson had portrayed Aspasia as the "lim'd soul" who overcame temptation, then he might have made her the model of perfection and still made her a character. But, as it is, Aspasia is never really tempted; hers is a "fugitive and cloistered virtue unexercised and unbreathed." It seems as if she had thought about everything in life and had made all her decisions beforehand. Aspasia reacts with the precision

25 IV.VII. 12-14.
26 IV.I. 10-12.
of an automat. Her judgments are pronouncements delivered with a Jove-like detachment and with the vigour of his thunderbolt. They come like the edicts they are—from Johnson. With her statuesque beauty, and her god-like detachment, and with intellectual arguments wielded with a power reminiscent of the six-foot Johnson, Aspasia seems more masculine than feminine.

And Johnson himself may have been aware that there was much that was masculine about Aspasia and may later have tried to counteract this impression by insisting that she was not the Amazonian type of woman. Whether he was aware of her masculinity or not, it was not his intention to create an Amazonian type of woman. Johnson regarded aggression as a purely masculine trait. On three separate occasions, once in the Rambler, and twice in the Idler, he expressed his disapproval of any trace of masculinity, or what he regarded as masculinity, in a woman. So that when Irene, in praising Aspasia's courage, asked her why she did not fight beside her countrymen at the fall of Constantinople, Johnson very carefully has Aspasia reply that women were not formed for such. "Passive Fortitude" was a woman's courage, not fighting: "Our only Arms are Innocence and Meekness." If meekness is, as Aspasia says, a woman's

28 The Rambler, No. 115, III, 18. "I have no inclination to a woman who had the ruggedness of a man without his force. . . ." See The Idler, No. 6, V, 80-83 for his disapproval of the female equestrian and No. 87, VI, 42 for his jocose but censorious comments on the militancy of old maids.

29 III.VIII. 44-45.
defence, she is certainly not womanly, for on no occasion did she exhibit this quality. But earlier in the play, in Act II.1, Johnson had implanted in the audience's mind this image of a mannish woman. Irene regarded Aspasia as masculine in all things save her beauty. Johnson meant this only as the highest of compliments, but it must be admitted that Irene's compliment established the image of a masculine woman. The female form will not, in itself, make a woman womanly.

The one woman who is not the great lady and who does have contact with ordinary individuals is the one who is the least stick-like of Johnson's female characters. Perhaps the Princess Nekayah and the noble Aspasia are cardboard figures because Johnson made them great ladies. Johnson's own attitude toward women of rank likely hindered rather than assisted him in creating these two characters. Imlac, who is undoubtedly one of many representations of Johnson in Rasselas, is more at ease with Pekuah, and so is she with him. When Imlac tried to persuade her not to force access to the mad astronomer because she would bore the scholar, Pekuah scolded Imlac in a characteristically feminine way: "'That, said Pekuah, must be my care, I ask of you only to take me thither. My knowledge is perhaps more than you imagine it, and by concurring always with his opinions I shall make him think it greater than it is.'"30 Such a sharp retort Johnson would consider impolite for noblewomen to make. Yet, this very comment, because it is spontaneous and

30 Chapter XLVI, p. 601.
because Pekuah, like any woman, is not above flattering a man to gain his company, brings Pekuah momentarily to life.

The very circumstances into which Pekuah was thrust made her appear more human than either Nekayah or Aspasia. The latter two are seen in circumstances which are either improbable or unlikely, but Johnson placed Pekuah in the midst of the trivia of domestic life. She comments on the petty squabbles of the desert harem and the boredom of the husband satiated by love but starved for conversation. She recounts how she spent her days, how she relieved her boredom, and how she managed to establish a friendship with the desert robber. And these adventures she tells in the rambling style of a narrator, and this style, which approximates closely that of conversation, makes her appear more life-like than Nekayah:

I never knew the power of gold before. From that time I was leader of the troop. The march of every day was longer and shorter as I commanded, and the tents were pitched where I chose to rest. We now had camels and other conveniences for travel, my own women were always at my side, and I amused myself...  

Contrast this to the mode of Nekayah's speech which least approximates conversation; it is the prose of Johnson, the essayist — the weighty comment, the inverted structure, the noun clauses in apposition:

Whether perfect happiness would be procured by perfect goodness, said Nekayah, this world will never afford an opportunity of deciding. But this, at least, may be maintained, that we do not always find visible happiness in proportion to visible virtue.  

31 Chapter XXXVIII, p. 585.

32 Chapter XXVII, p. 562.
Even when Nekayah's conversation borders on the trivial, her little fishes always talk like whales.

Johnson's female characters are papier mâché figures because, by depriving them of weaknesses, he deprived them to some extent of life. By delineating his characters on too broad a concept of generality, he failed to incorporate in their being the vivid, sensory details which would have given them individuality. So general are his characterizations that he stripped them of individuality, so much so that not one of his female characters is really womanly. The only thing which distinguishes one from the other is the ideas each expresses. So engrossed was Johnson with pointing the moral, or in expressing an idea, that the action in Irene and Rasselas is nonexistent; all action is reported. This lack of action, coupled with a lack of genuine emotional response, makes his female figures wooden and unfeminine. Pekuah is the least wooden and unfeminine, not because she is herself charming, but because Johnson has her tell her adventurous tale with such ease and grace. It is the tale, not Pekuah, which is charming.

32 Chapter XXVII, p. 562.

33 Johnson was an accomplished story-teller. "No man told a story with so good a grace." Piozzi, Anecdotes, I, 226; See also Hawkins, Life, p. 258; Hannah More, Memoirs, I, 69-70.
Chapter V

THEORY AND PRACTICE

The purpose of this last chapter is to show how closely what can be called Johnson's "theoretical" views of women as found in his works agree with his "practical" view; that is, with the type of woman Johnson chose for friends. The similarity between the theoretical and actual is great. The woman he married, Mrs. Elizabeth Porter, and those he befriended and admired, Mrs. Thrale, Fanny Burney, Mrs. Anna Williams, Hannah More, Mrs. Montagu, and Hill Boothby, are all the Aspasia-Nekayah-Pekuah type of woman. Their piety was firm, and with the exception of Elizabeth Porter, their virtue was exemplary. All were women of marked intellect with a love of literature and a taste for books. With the exception of Fanny Burney, all were fond of participating in discussion and argument. Yet they never carried their love of ratiocination so far as to rob them of their femininity. They were not aggressively masculine, but they were women of spirit, who could hold their own in a discussion on any ordinary topic. But in one way, four of these women, Johnson's wife,

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1 Mrs. Delany, a well known Bluestocking earlier in the eighteenth century, told Queen Caroline that Miss Burney had one fault: "'She wants so much drawing out, ma'am.'" "'Yes, but she's very well worth it!'" Mme. D'Arblay, Diaries and Letters, III, 374; see also ibid., I, 114 and III, 229.
Mrs. Thrale, Hannah More, and Fanny Burney, were unlike Johnson's figure of womanhood; they exhibited a wit and a gaiety, which are not to be found in any of Johnson's female characters. Wit and gaiety Johnson admired in a woman, for, to him, these qualities, coupled with virtue, intelligence and understanding, and skill in conversation, made her an agreeable companion to a man.

However, much of the information which reveals the qualities of these women Johnson knew and admired is to be found, not in his works, but in the works and diaries and letters of others — Boswell, Mrs. Thrale, Fanny Burney, Hannah More, and Sir John Hawkins. Johnson was, so Mrs. Thrale said, very careful not to commit to paper his opinions of those whom he knew.²

These women Johnson sought as friends were both pious and virtuous. For Johnson to befriend them, their morals would have to be impeccable, for, although Johnson may have been charitable to those women holding to moral principles less rigid than he thought desirable, he drew a sharp distinction between the chaste and the unchaste woman.³ In his lapidary inscription to his wife, Johnson termed her "pia." Perhaps

² Piozzi, Anecdotes, I, 159; see also Boswell's Life, IV, 102, for Johnson's comment that he put as little as possible in his letters.

³ Boswell, Private Papers, X, 173. Johnson had treated a woman in Dr. James's coach with the deference and civility due a wife. Johnson was angry when he learned that the woman was Dr. James's mistress.
Johnson had followed his own advice; he once said that it was not necessary in lapidary inscriptions to adhere strictly to the truth. If Johnson was using *pia* in its broader sense of virtuous, the term could hardly have been applied to Tetty. According to Dr. Robert Levett, Tetty had, in her later years, acquired a taste for the bottle and a weakness for opium. Johnson could, of course, have used the term in the restricted sense of religious. He did regard piety as a woman's greatest virtue, and told Boswell that a man did well to choose for a wife a woman who held firm religious principles.⁵ According to Mrs. Thrale, Henry Thrale had chosen her because, among other reasons, she was "passive" and "well grounded in Religion and highly principled to love Virtue."⁶ Of Mrs. Thrale's virtue in the wider sense, Fanny Burney commented that she was "free from envy, hatred and malice."⁷ Johnson commented on her good humour;⁸ others, on her gaiety and agreeableness.⁹ As for Fanny Burney, no one commented on her piety, but the man whom she regarded as a second father [Samuel Crisp] called her a prude.¹⁰

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⁵ Boswell, *Life*, II, 76.
⁸ Piozzi, *op. cit.*., II, 690.
¹⁰ Mme. D'Arblay, *op. cit.*., I, 150.
Her behaviour toward Mr. Turbulent and her comments about him substantiated Mr. Crisp's comment.\textsuperscript{11} And Anna Williams, if she was peevish in her later years, had, much earlier, been complimented for her humility, modesty, patience, and cheerfulness.\textsuperscript{12} If she had not the even temperament of Mrs. Thrale or Fanny Burney, she had qualities which Johnson considered of great virtue: a desire "to promote the welfare and happiness of others."\textsuperscript{13} From Johnson's own comments after her death, she seems to have made his life a little less miserable. Two other women, Hannah More and Hill Boothby, if they did not regard it as their duty to help others, certainly spent much of their time doing so. Hannah More was one of the early pioneers for the education of women and, like Johnson, advocated educating the female poor because she considered that education would foster virtue. After the death of her friend, Mrs. Fitzherbert, Hill Boothby reared Fitzherbert's children. Although Johnson regarded service to one's fellow men not solely as a virtue but as the duty of man,\textsuperscript{14} yet he thought, according to Mrs. Thrale, that Miss Boothby carried her sense of duty and piety too far: "She somewhat disqualified herself [he said] for the duties of this

\textsuperscript{11} Fanny Burney took exception to Mr. Turbulent's courtesies and thought his attention to her, which seemed innocent enough from her account, improper. \textit{Diaries and Letters}, III, 172-173, 193-200.


\textsuperscript{13} Hawkins, \textit{Life}, p. 324.

\textsuperscript{14} \textit{The Rambler}, No. 129, III, 107; \textit{Rasselas}, Chapter XXVIII, p. 563.
life, by her perpetual aspirations after the next."\textsuperscript{15} Mrs. Montagu was also known for her charities; she had, at Johnson's solicitation, provided Anna Williams with a pension and earlier taken a subscription for the blind woman's verses.\textsuperscript{16} And one can be sure that, when the decorous Fanny Burney spoke of Mrs. Montagu's being "our sex's glory,"\textsuperscript{17} the compliment was all inclusive. Mrs. Elizabeth Carter, writing to Mrs. Vesey, said of her: "it is impossible for one fully to discover . . . the beauties of her character," for these were seen only by those who knew her intimately.\textsuperscript{18}

The literary accomplishments of Fanny Burney, Mrs. Thrale-Piozzi, Mrs. Anna Williams, and Hannah More attest to their superior abilities. Fanny Burney found herself the talk of literary circles once she acknowledged the authorship of \textit{Evelina}. No doubt Johnson's and Mrs. Thrale's puffing up \textit{Evelina} helped Fanny Burney to gain literary recognition, yet the novel was talked about even before these two began recommending it.\textsuperscript{19} If \textit{Evelina} is not one of the great novels of the eighteenth century, it is not without merit. As Johnson said, it was a just representation of the customs and manners of the age. If some of the

\textsuperscript{15} Piozzi, \textit{Anecdotes}, I, 257.

\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Letters}, No. 891, III, 82; \textit{Ibid.}, No. 132, 122-123.

\textsuperscript{17} Mme. D'Arblay, \textit{op. cit.}, I, 109.


\textsuperscript{19} Mme. D'Arblay, \textit{Early Diary}, II, 233.
characters, Evelina herself and the Reverend Mr. Villars and Lord Orville and Sir Willoughby, are no more than personifications of unsophistication, dull solicitude, goodness and villainy, there are others, Madame Duval, the Branghton cousins, and Mr. Smith, who are well drawn. If readers today find that sections of the novel tax their patience because they no longer sympathize with the problems of a naïve eighteen-year-old heroine's début into polite society, most will admit that the novel has a charm. Fanny Burney, though never a wit in company, had a good sense of the comic. But the novel has merit, if only for its historical significance as the first novel of manners, later to be developed with greater skill by Jane Austen.

Mrs. Thrale-Piozzi's early verses, such as "Offley Park 1761," offer little evidence of her abilities and do not presage her later literary successes. However, Johnson thought sufficiently well of her poetic efforts to request a few poems from her to supplement those of Mrs. Anna Williams, who was, with the aid of Johnson, publishing her Miscellanies. Mrs. Thrale's day was to come later — after Johnson's death — with the publication of the Anecdotes of the Late Samuel Johnson, LL.D. and the Letters to and from Dr. Johnson. Despite Boswell's deprecation of Mrs. Thrale's abilities in his Life of Johnson, elsewhere,

before rivalry between the two had set in, he had not slighted her understanding. A friend of his, Dr. James Beattie, admired Mrs. Thrale for her intellectual capabilities. Hayward quotes Wraxall as saying: "Mrs. Thrale always appeared to me to possess at least as much information, a mind as cultivated, and more brilliancy of intellect than Mrs. Montagu." 

For once, Johnson recorded his estimation of Anna Williams' abilities. His earliest recorded opinion of her was to Samuel Richardson in 1754, and of her he said: "She had ... many ... arts with which Ladies are seldom acquainted." One of these arts of which Johnson thought her a master was chemistry. And the fact that he tried to procure subscriptions from his friends for her anthology of verse, Miscellanies, indicates that he thought the work at least publishable.

21 For example, Boswell reported Johnson as saying that Mrs. Thrale's "learning is that of a school boy in the lower forms." Boswell's Life, I, 494. James Boswell, Letters of James Boswell, No. 140, I, 222, ed. C. B. Tinker (Oxford, 1924). "I am at present in a tourbillon of conversations. But how come you to throw in the Thrales among the Reynoldees and Beauclercs? Mr. Thrale is a worthy sensible man and has the wits much about the house. But he is not one himself. Perhaps you mean Mrs. Thrale."

22 Life of Beattie, loc. cit.


24 Letters, No. 51.1, I, 55.

25 Ibid., No. 132.9 "June '59," I, 122-123. It was not published until 1766.
Eighteenth-century theatre-goers and poetry readers thought well of Hannah More's literary capabilities. Her tragedy Percy [1777] was an immediate success, "a triumph" she said; even on the twelfth night the theatre overflowed, despite the fact that King George and Queen Caroline were attending Sheridan's School for Scandal at another playhouse. David Garrick considered the play good theatre; he wrote the prologue and epilogue for it. Even before the first performance, Hannah said, "he thinks of nothing, talks of nothing, writes of nothing but Percy." The first edition of four thousand copies was sold out within a fortnight, and a new edition called for. In 1782, on her visit to Oxford, she found the line from her poem "Sensibility": "And is not Johnson ours, himself a host," beneath Johnson's portrait in the common room of Pembroke College. Johnson must have thought well of her abilities, for he offered to correct "Sir Eldred of the Bower" and the "Bleeding Rock"; for the former, he composed one stanza: "My scorn has oft . . .", but in the latter, he changed nothing. Johnson did not always pay budding poets or playwrights this compliment. Of her poem

26 Hannah More, Memoirs, I, 122-123, 128, 130.

27 Ibid., I, 261.

28 Ibid., I, 64. For these poems the publisher Cadell offered her the same price that Goldsmith received for the "Deserted Village" —100 gns., loc. cit.

29 Ibid., I, 200-201. "Mrs. B. [Hannah More's only identification] repeatedly asked Johnson to look over her new play of the 'Siege of Sinope'. . . . [When Johnson suggested she could improve it herself, she said she had no time.] 'I have so many irons in the fire.' 'Why then, . . . the best thing I can advise you to do is, to put your tragedy along with your irons'.
"Bas Bleu," Johnson, whom Hannah called "that parsimonious praiser," said: "there was no name in poetry that might not be glad to own it." 30

Just as Johnson's female characters show little narrowness in their education, so did the women he knew. If their learning lacked depth, they were certainly, for ladies, well read by eighteenth-century standards. Four of them, Hannah More, Fanny Burney, Mrs. Thrale, and Mrs. Montagu, were known to society as Bluestockings. All were interested in a variety of topics: politics, literary criticism, poetry, plays, novels, and religious works. Through their reading they had acquired critical judgment and did not have to sit back and be told what to think. Boswell reported that Johnson had great confidence in his wife's judgment and taste. Posterity has borne out her judgment, phrased in the form of a compliment, on Johnson's Ramblers: "'I thought very well of you before; but I did not imagine you could have written anything equal to this'." 31 If some thought Irene a great tragedy, 32 Hannah More's critical judgment told her otherwise: "... what Johnson says of Cato may be applied to his Irene; the same exalted sentiments, harmonious verse, and highly polished style, and the same deficiency in what relates to the passions and affections." 33 Fanny Burney was quick to

30 Ibid., I, 319-320. See Letters, No. 954, III, 157. "Miss Moore has written a poem called Le Bas blue; which is in my opinion, a very great performance."


33 Memoirs, I, 188. For Johnson's comment on Addison's Cato, see Chapter IV, p. 73.
realize the literary worth of Johnson's *Lives of the Poets* and to praise, in her effusive way, the ease and vigour of his style and the justness of his sentiments. Yet her praise was not without reservations; she thought Johnson had dealt a trifle harshly with Prior and made Gray's accomplishment appear insignificant. An idea of the notice that literary circles took of Mrs. Thrale's critical judgment can be gained from Dr. Burney's comment on *Evelina*: "One might be sure there is something in it by Mrs. Cholmondeley's recommending it so strongly — for such women as she and Mrs. Thrale are afraid of à tort et à travers, and if there is not something more than common as they know they are liable to have their opinions quoted, they are d—lish shy of speaking favourably." 

Like the Greek Aspasia of old, these women, because of their intellect, talents, judgment, and understanding, were women of accomplishment who could provide Johnson with the type of companionship he desired. Bertrand H. Bronson suggests that Johnson found, or thought he found, in his wife the qualities with which he endowed Aspasia and that the play is a compliment to her. If, as Bronson suggests, Demetrius and Mahomet speak for Johnson when the former calls Aspasia "Calm of my Cares, and Guardian of my Virtue," and the latter can with Irene

34 Mme D'Arblay, *Diaries and Letters*, I, 443.
"... ease my loaded Soul upon her Bosom," then Johnson expected to find in Elizabeth Porter one in whom he could find a companion. Since little is known for certain about Johnson's wife, and since reports of her conflict, it would be safer to take what Johnson thought she had provided him with, despite the fact that Johnson's remarks may be coloured by romantic sentimentalizing. What she had meant to Johnson can be conjectured from a letter he wrote to Dr. Thomas Lawrence twenty-eight years after her death: "He that outlives a wife ... sees himself disjoined from interest, from the only companion with whom he has shared much good and much evil; and with whom he could set his mind at liberty to retrace the past, or anticipate the future." This is not the only expression that his wife had been a companion to him. In the celebrated letter to Lord Chesterfield, he wrote of his indifference to his Lordship's praise because the enjoyment he might have felt was no longer possible: "... till I am solitary and cannot impart it."

After 1752, he turned for companionship to others of the same general type as Elizabeth Porter. In his own home, he

37 Irene, IV.i. 11-12; I.iv.22.
38 Letters, No. 650, II, 331.
39 See also Letters, No. 56, I, 59 written in the same vein to Thomas Warton and commenting on Mr. Dodsley's loss of his wife.
40 Ibid., No. 61, I, 65.
created a situation resembling that of a family by housing others less fortunate than himself. The most notable among these was Mrs. Anna Williams. In 1764 or 1765 he met Mrs. Thrale, one who was to provide him with companionship for eighteen years. In society he chose women well known in literary circles—Mrs. Montagu, Hannah More, and Fanny Burney. Anna Williams, who he said had acted to him as a sister, had, for thirty years, provided him with "domestic amusement." His remarks in letters to friends show how much of a companion she had been to him: ". . . she sustained forty years of misery with steady fortitude. Thirty years and more she had been my companion and her death has left me desolate." She had many accomplishments which would enable her to interest Johnson. He himself wrote "her acquisitions are many, and her curiosity universal; so that she partook of every conversation." Others substantiated Johnson's comments; Hawkins spoke of "her enlightened understanding." and Hannah More, of her "lively and entertaining conversation." So great was Johnson's delight in her conversation that, in 1759, when she did not have lodgings in Johnson's house, he visited her every night for tea and talk, despite the hour. And talking to her, he could enjoy

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41 Ibid., No. 898, III, 97.
42 Ibid., 884, III, 73-74; See also No. 879.2, III, 61; No. 881, III, 70; No. 883, III, 73; No. 898, III, 97.
43 Ibid., No. 881, III, 70.
44 Life, p. 324.
45 Memoirs, I, 49.
46 Boswell's Life, I, 421.
that kind of conversation which he said was happiest, that in which there was "no competition, no vanity, but a calm exchange of sentiment." Conversing with her, Johnson could be at ease; he did not have a reputation to uphold, as he did in society, of the sage, the moralist, the critic, and entertainer.

With Mrs. Thrale he enjoyed her company not only in the limelight of society but also in the privacy of Streatham. If he censured her for her unconscious misrepresentations of truth and for her thoughtlessness, his boundless praise indicates what value he set on her companionship: "to see and hear you is always to hear wit and to see virtue." When she commented: "I wonder how you bear with my nonsense," he replied: "No, madam, you never talk nonsense; you have as much sense, and more wit, than any woman I know." This wit and gaiety, which Johnson said was the measure of a man and which Fanny Burney said Mrs. Thrale had in abundance, had a particular appeal for Johnson; mirth is one of the best anodynes for gloom. So that it was not just her talk which engaged Johnson; his Ode written to Mrs. Thrale in Skye is a measure of what her company meant to him.

48 *Letters*, No. 308, I, 326.
49 Mme. D'Arblay, *Diaries and Letters*, I, 82.
Inter erroris salebrosa longi,
Inter ignotae strepitus loquelae,
Quot modis mecum, quid ægat, requiro,
Thralia dulcis? [stanza 3]

Sit memor nostri, fideique merces,
Stet fides constans, meritoque blandum
Thraliae discant resonare nomen
Litora Skiae [stanza 5] 51

With the exception of Fanny Burney, those women in society that Johnson singled out for particular attention were also accomplished conversationalists — Mrs. Montagu, for her knowledge, and Hannah More, for her wit. With the older woman, Johnson quarrelled and harangued. Reasoning and haranguing, Fanny said, she did well, but of wit, she had none. 52 At Streatham Mrs. Montagu was held in high esteem, "even with Dr. Johnson himself, when others do not praise her improperly." 53 Of her conversation Johnson said: "She diffuses more knowledge than any woman I know, or indeed almost any man." 54 In 1780, he wrote to Mrs. Thrale, again complimenting Mrs. Montagu on her skill as a conversationalist: "She is par pluribus:

Through paths that halt from stone to stone,
Amid the din of tongues unknown,
One image haunts my soul alone,
Thine, gentle Thrale!

52 Mme. D'Arblay, op. cit., I, 352; Boswell, Life, IV, 275.

53 Ibid., I, 115.

54 Ibid., I, 116.
conversing with her you will find variety in one." But the younger woman, who was a favourite with Johnson, delighted him with her wit: "You would have imagined we had been at some comedy had you heard our peals of laughter. They [Johnson and Hannah], indeed, tried which could 'pepper the highest', and it is not clear to me that the lexicographer was really the highest seasoner." But Johnson admired these women, not because they agreed with him when they fell to discussion, for the opposite was often the case. They were, like Aspasia, women of spirit, not the "sleepy souled" women Johnson said he despised. If they disagreed with him, they said so. If the reports of Tetty do not err, and they likely do not, she and Johnson had many differences of opinion. It would have been strange, indeed, if, during their eighteen years of friendship, Mrs. Thrale and Johnson had not quarrelled. According to her, he was perpetually trying to reform her, and she, him, so that "Our Life glides away in your scolding me or my scolding you — it answers however that's certain for both improve." Unlike Mrs. Montagu, she

55 Letters, No. 663, II, 351.
57 Hannah More, Memoirs, I, 54. A letter from Miss Sarah More to one of her sisters [1775].
58 Piozzi, op. cit., I, 247.
59 Piozzi, Thraliana, I, 601, Appendix A, "The Second Surviving Fragment of Mrs. Thrale's Early 'Johnsoniana'."
never feared Johnson. Boswell reported that Mrs. Thrale "stood to her guns with great courage" defending Prior's love ditties despite Johnson's concluding remark: "'My dear Lady, talk no more of this. Nonsense can but be defended by nonsense'."60

If Mrs. Montagu feared Johnson, her fear of him did not prevent her from disagreeing with him. The famous Lyttleton quarrel,61 lasting for five years, ended with Johnson writing the conciliatory letters in 1783.62 Yet Johnson was sorry to lose her company; in 1781 he said: "Mrs. Montagu has dropt me. Now, Sir, there are people whom one should like very well to drop, but would not wish to be dropped by."63 He even had his differences with his favourite, Hannah More, but, from her memoirs and letters, their quarrels seemed to have been few and restricted to moral and religious issues. His anger at her reading Tom Jones, and, what was, he thought, worse in finding it amusing, has already been mentioned. He also criticized her "as a good Protestant," for reading books written by Catholics. But she defended herself, and Johnson capitulated: "I am heartily glad that you read pious books, by whomever they may be written."64

The one with whom he never quarrelled was Fanny Burney. He was

60 Boswell's Life, II, 78.
61 The quarrel began in 1778 over Johnson's handling of Lyttleton's character in his Life of Lyttleton.
62 Letters, No. 884, III, 73-74 and No. 891, III, 82.
63 Boswell, op. cit., IV, 73; Private Papers, XIV, 174.
64 Memoirs, I, 211. The Book was Pascal's Les Pensees.
aware of her shyness, her lack of confidence, and her sensitivity to criticism: "... learn to be a swaggerer [he said to her], at least so far as to be able to face the world." 65

If, sometimes in conversation, Johnson took the attitude that it was his to teach and others to learn, 66 he never spoke patronizingly, neither to man, woman, nor child. He acted more like Imlac, as guide, philosopher, and friend. He treated women as Rasselas, Imlac, and Demetrius treated Nekayah, Pekuah, and Aspasia — never with condescension. "There is nothing [said Johnson] more likely to betray a man into absurdity than condescension; when he supposes his understanding too powerful for his company." 67 So that if he was asked — as he was by Fanny Burney — if there was such a thing as invention, since Shakespeare never saw a Caliban, Johnson's answer was neither pompous nor scholarly but, as always, simple, so that no one could fail to understand: "'No, but he had seen a man, and knew, therefore how to vary him to a monster... . Let two men, one with genius, the other with none, look at an overturned waggon:— he who has no genius will think of the wagon only as he sees it, overturned, and walk on; he who has genius will paint it to himself before it was overturned, — standing still, and moving

66 Piozzi, Anecdotes, I, 268-269.
67 Boswell's Life, IV, 3.
on, and heavy loaded, and empty; but both must see the wagon, to think of it at all." Yet the examples which best show that he exhibited no trace of intellectual pride from a sense of his own superiority can be found in his letters to the young Queeney. In 1772, he wrote to the eight-year-old Queeney explaining dying by an analogy: "Generations, as Homer says, are but like leaves; and you now see the faded leaves falling about you." When she was sixteen, and he was urging her to enjoy "as much of the intellectual world" as she could, he wrote to her as if she were his equal: "If Ideas are to us the measure of time, he that thinks most, lives longest. Berkeley says that one man lives more life in an hour, than another in a week."

If anything, Johnson's attitude toward women was, as Hannah More said, *en cavalier,* much like Demetrius' attitude to Aspasia. Hannah More wrote from Oxford in 1782: "Who do you think is my principal Cicerone at Oxford? Only Dr. Johnson! And we do so gallant it about." Hawkins said he had been told by David Garrick, Dr. Hawkesworth, and others, that Johnson's behaviour to his wife was one of profound respect. His rushing down in morning dishabille to show Mme. Bouffler to her

69 *Queeney Letters*, p. 6.
73 *Life*, p. 314.
coach is another instance of Johnson's awkward gallantry.\textsuperscript{74} No doubt he thought this the behaviour of a gentleman, and Johnson, according to report, found nothing so flattering as being termed polite.\textsuperscript{75} But so much emphasis has been given to the Johnson who "downed" others that little attention has been paid to his gallantry to the ladies, probably because most commentators on Johnson have relied heavily on Boswell for their information and have disregarded \textit{Thraliana} and Hannah More's and Fanny Burney's memoirs or diaries and letters. Their writings give a different side of Johnson than Boswell; they saw less of the \textit{Ursa Maior} in him. Boswell realized this, of course, for, according to Fanny Burney, he asked her to supply him with anecdotes of "the gay Sam, the agreeable Sam, the pleasant Sam."\textsuperscript{76}

What Johnson wrote of women is consistent with the way he treated them in life. If what a man really thinks is to be taken, as Cicero said, from a man's actions and not from his words, then Johnson passed this test. Although society thought he erred, he wrote that women were reasonable creatures capable of intellectual pursuits, and, in life, he treated them as if they were. His educational scheme was based on the premise that women had minds which could and, to him, should be developed. He could not understand what logic a society was using which left the education of women "to the direction of chance"

\textsuperscript{74} Boswell, \textit{op. cit.}, IV, 405-406.
\textsuperscript{75} Piozzi, \textit{op. cit.}, I, 168.
\textsuperscript{76} Mme. D'Arblay, \textit{op. cit.}, IV, 432.
when "so much of our domestic happiness is in their hands." The women he chose as his intimates — Mrs. Elizabeth Porter, Mrs. Thrale, Fanny Burney, Mrs. Anna Williams, Hannah More, Mrs. Montagu, and Hill Boothby — were women who had done what he had urged women to do; they had paid more attention to the development of their minds than to the adornment of their persons and to the acquisition of the so-called accomplishments of the polite world. He did not fear, as society did, that book learning would rob a woman of her femininity; nor did he believe that book learning would increase female vanity. On the contrary, from studies she might learn sense. If she read the books Johnson thought suitable, she would at least find it necessary to learn to think.

Johnson advocated book learning for women because he believed that studies developed character. He thought that if women were liberally educated, they would be pious, moral, sensible, good-natured, interesting, gracious; in short, they would possess all those qualities which a man of sense and understanding would wish them to possess. Yet there were benefits other than moral accruing from studies. The acquisition of knowledge was, to Johnson, one of the chief means to happiness, for those who had something to do and something to think about would be less likely to find an escape in self-engrossment.

77 *The Rambler*, No. 34, I, 219.
Concentration on self was productive of unhappiness or worse.\textsuperscript{78} He believed that the ability to turn one's activities outside oneself must be kept alive at all costs. Women who had been subjected to an education which emphasized book learning and who were interested in the world about them would be better companions to their husbands. For, these were the women who would be more likely to possess that inner tranquility so necessary to conjugal happiness, and these were also the women who would be more likely to be interested in and interesting to others. Johnson, therefore, urged men to choose their mates, not for beauty or fortune, as society would have them do, but for qualities of character. Johnson chose his own female friends for those same qualities he said in his works were worthy of womanhood. He also said in his works that women could, if liberally educated, provide men with companionship, and his own relationship with women who were liberally educated is proof of it.

In theory at least, if not always in practice, Johnson's faith in womankind was great. It is not unusual for a man like Johnson, who was, in many ways, a most exacting judge of human nature and, in many other ways, one of the most charitable of judges, to have such faith in women, and society, who expected less and therefore exacted less of women, should have so little.

\textsuperscript{78} See \textit{Rasselas}, Chapter XLV, pp. 598-600, the discourse with an old man and Chapter XLIII and XLIV, pp. 594-596 on the mad astronomer and the dangers of the imagination.
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