

Title: Proper Writers, Public Ladies: Eighteenth-Century Conduct Literature and Women's Paths to Print

Abstract: My paper will examine eighteenth-century conduct literature as an avenue for genteel women to enter the 'promiscuous culture of print', becoming 'public wom[e]n' without incurring the reputational damage this status often entailed (Russell 2010). Recognising that this dynamic has already received critical attention (Morris 2005), I intend to use Mrs H. Cartwright's *Letters on Female Education, Addressed to a Married Lady* (1777) to prompt a renewed engagement with conduct literature as a medium for female self-expression.

Letters is a rebellious text at the formal level. Commencing as a series of letters – 'calculated to improve', as Cartwright asserts in her dedication to the Blue Stockings' founder Elizabeth Montagu – to a new mother on 'the proper management of children', the work transitions abruptly into a novel. As if having run away with its author, it never transitions back; in a brief digression, the narrator, imagining her addressee's impatience with the 'tedious story', insists that 'as it is not only fact, but productive of a moral that may be highly serviceable to those who are in a similar situation, I shall not pretend to abridge it'. *Letters* was Cartwright's debut publication: she produced at least five more novels.

Employing Poovey's argument that 'the epistolary form generates moral anarchy' (1984), this paper will consider the potential of eighteenth-century conduct literature written by and for women as a site of female resistance. From Poovey to Fraiman (1993) to Munderlein (2024), analysis of eighteenth-century conduct literature has long emphasised its restrictive, even detrimental aspects: as Gilbert and Gubar observe, so narrow and contradictory was the eighteenth-century ideal that 'the emerging self [could] only survive with a sustained double vision' (1979). Building from a close reading of *Letters*, I hope to invite further exploration of the 'anarch[ic]' possibilities of female-authored conduct literature.

Bio: In August 2025, I graduated from the University of Oxford with a First Class BA (Hons) in English Language and Literature, and I am now pursuing a career in academia. I currently hold offers for Oxford's MSt in English (1700-1830), and for the University of Cambridge's MPhil in Digital Humanities, both of which would commence in October this year. My research interests are varied, but I am especially fascinated by early newspaper history and the 'feminization' of the public sphere in the late eighteenth century (Knowles 2023): the subjects of my undergraduate dissertation!

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