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The Affectionate Author: Family Love as Rhetorical Device in Eighteenth-Century Conduct Books for Young Women

Elizabeth Kukorelly

Eighteenth-century conduct manuals for young women did all they could to obtain their readers' compliance with the conduct rules they laid down; one way in which they did this was to deploy familial affection as a rhetorical device. Although at first glance this may seem to be an expression of companionate family love, a closer look shows how affection is systematically exchanged for obedience, and thus serves to maintain hierarchical power difference. Nevertheless, the use of an affectionate rhetoric can be read as evidence of limited emancipation for young women, since rather than commanded to obey, they are enjoined to comply with, the conduct rules laid down in the texts. The love of parents for their children was considered to be entirely natural, and natural parental love was seen to obtain in return, not filial love, but respect and gratitude. Eighteenth-century conduct books transform affection into advice through the work of writing; girls are expected to transform gratitude into good conduct through the work of reading. The respective labours of writing and reading make the raw materials of affection and gratitude into exchangeable commodities: books on the print market, and young women on the marriage market. In this essay, I look at how a group of epistolary familial conduct books, each of which is posited as being written from an affectionate family member to a daughter or a niece, uses love in order to obtain good conduct.

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With what joy should I see my dearest girl shine forth a bright example of everything that is amiable and praiseworthy! – And how sweet would be the reflection that I had, in any degree, contributed to make her so! – My heart expands with the affecting thought, and pours forth in this adieu the most ardent wishes for your perfection! – If the tender solicitude express'd for your welfare by this “labour of love” can engage your gratitude, you will always remember how deeply your conduct interests the happiness of

Your most affectionate Aunt. (Chapone II: 229-230)

When Hester Chapone ends her *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind* with this outpouring of familial love, she bears witness to a cultural moment that was convinced that texts could influence their readers. One way conduct books for young women endeavoured to maximize their influence was by deploying words of affection. Chapone hopes her niece will become “a bright example of everything that is amiable and praiseworthy” because her aunt’s “labour of love” will “engage [her] gratitude.” Striving for readers’ compliance, familial epistolary conduct books gently ease them into a state of beloved bliss at the centre of affectionate sociability. Affection is used as a rhetorical device aimed at obtaining the unconditional obedience of young women.

The use of familial love in this context is aligned with contemporary ideas on how it functioned and what it could obtain. The love of parents for their children was considered to be entirely natural, and natural parental love was seen to obtain in return, not filial love, but respect and gratitude. Eighteenth-century conduct books transform affection into advice through the work of writing; girls are expected to transform gratitude into good conduct through the work of reading. The respective labours of writing and reading make the raw materials of affection and gratitude into exchangeable commodities: books on the print market, and young women on the marriage market. This gives young women some power over their own value, in what is surely a reformatory and emancipating move. The act of deploying love as rhetoric implies that young women need to be enjoined to comply, instead of commanded to obey. Furthermore, if conduct books attempt to discipline young women, by resorting to persuasion rather than compulsion, their writers implicitly recognize that they are, to quote John Locke, in charge of “the right direction of [their] conduct to true happiness” (*Essay* 246; bk. II, ch. 21, sect. 53). Although it has become commonplace to dispute Lawrence Stone’s progressive family historiography (from authoritarian and unloving before the eighteenth century to egalitarian and loving thereafter) there is certainly an evolution of familial relations

towards greater freedom for children from parental control.¹ Conduct books for adolescent girls may be part of this evolution. In this essay, I will show how they use familial love in a transactional affective paradigm to obtain the good conduct of daughters and nieces. Though this transaction upholds the power differential between older and younger family members, it bears witness to greater latitude for young women, if not to choose to misbehave, at least to envisage choice as an option. I will examine how eighteenth-century moral philosophers and novelists describe parental affection and foster the idea of the family as a sentimental unit built on love and respect, before turning to a small corpus of epistolary conduct manuals for young women, purportedly written by family members, as I explore how their authors deployed affection as part of their persuasive arsenal.

Familial affection, especially parental love, was deemed by many moral philosophers of the eighteenth century to be entirely natural since human offspring required lengthy and sustained care to bring them to maturity; children reciprocated with duty, gratitude and reverence. John Locke, the Earl of Shaftesbury, Francis Hutcheson, David Hume, Adam Smith and Thomas Reid were all convinced of this.² The Scottish Enlightenment philosophers viewed parental love as natural, yet described it in their writing as a social event validated by the community, at times a community of genteel consumers of culture.³ Hutcheson – the earliest of the four – is convinced that parents have a “fond disinterested affection” for their children and describes a family as “an amiable society” which “nature has constituted” as a “permanent relation” (188). Hume states that “the relation of blood produces the strongest tie the

¹ Margaret Ezell notes the high degree of control that seventeenth-century mothers and fathers had over their children’s lives (34), citing Robert Filmer (139) and Mary More’s unprinted essay “The Woman’s Right” (139, 152). This was undoubtedly on the wane in the next century, though it would be fallacious to assert that parent-child hierarchy was abolished; even a radical thinker such as Mary Wollstonecraft stopped short of claiming that this was desirable, although she went far in stipulating a more egalitarian version of the family. As Eileen Botting has shown, Wollstonecraft wished to rid the family of “patriarchal hierarchies” but “retain[ed] its affectionate tutelary environment, its benevolent parental hierarchy” (157).

² For Locke “Parents [are] wisely ordain’d by nature to love their children” (*Some Thoughts Concerning Education* 103). Shaftesbury puts “parental Kindness, Zeal for Posterity, Concern for the Propagation and Nurture of the Young” at the head of his list of “natural Affection,” claiming that such feelings are as “*proper* and *natural*” as “for the Stomach to digest, the Lungs to breathe” (II, 78).

³ The production of sentiment in and by sociability has been shown by John Mullan in *Sentiment and Sociability*, and Eileen Botting also discusses this in *Family Feuds* (137).

mind is capable of in the love of parents to their children, and a lesser degree of the same affection, as the relation lessens"; this "strongest tie" rather than felt by parents, is a function of the imaginative capacity of the mind, and "it must be from the force and liveliness of conception" that the love is derived (228, 229). Later he writes: "We blame a father for neglecting his child. Why? because it shews a want of natural affection, which is the duty of every parent," showing parental neglect to be subject to a communal tribunal ("We blame") that judges paternal value (307).

Further into the century, the role of community affirmation becomes more focussed, and happy families are an edifying spectacle. In his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Adam Smith spends some time rehearsing the by now familiar notion that parental love is natural (199) whilst children reciprocate with duty. Both are culpable when deficient: "A parent without parental tenderness, a child devoid of all filial reverence, appear monsters, the objects not of hatred only, but of horror" (323). In opposition to this monstrous spectacle is "that cordial satisfaction, that delicious sympathy, that confidential openness and ease," described earlier in the work as a scene of affectionate familial bliss:

With what pleasure do we look upon a family, through the whole of which reign mutual love and esteem, where the parents and children are companions for one another, without any other difference than what is made by respectful affection on the one side, and kind indulgence on the other; where freedom and fondness, mutual raillery and mutual kindness, shew that no opposition of interest divides the brothers, nor any rivalry of favours sets the sisters at variance, and where every thing presents us with the idea of peace, cheerfulness, harmony and contentment? (53)

In this tableau, hierarchical difference between parents and children is attenuated by a sense of companionship, though it perdures in the opposition of respect (by children) and indulgence (by parents).

Thomas Reid begins his chapter on "the particular Benevolent Affections" by stating that parents and children are linked by what "we commonly call *natural* affection" (III, 141). His discussion is quickly drawn in a representational direction, as a succession of tableaux are presented to illustrate parental love:

How common is it to see a young woman, in the gayest period of life, who has spent her days in mirth, and her nights in profound sleep, without solicitude or care, all at once transformed into the careful, the solicitous, the watchful nurse of her dear infant: doing nothing by day but gazing upon it,

and serving it in the meanest offices; by night, depriving herself of sound sleep for months, that it may lie safe in her arms. (III, 143)

Reid moves to the animal kingdom:

How pleasant it is to see the family economy of a pair of little birds in rearing their tender offspring; the conjugal affection and fidelity of the parents; their cheerful toil and industry in providing food to their family; their sagacity in concealing their habitation; the arts they use, often at the peril of their own lives, to decoy hawks, and other enemies, from their dwelling place, and the affliction they feel when some unlucky boy has robbed them of the dear pledges of their affection, and frustrated all their hopes of their rising family. (155-56)

Like Smith, Reid engages his readers to look on with delight at this sentimental scene. He makes explicit the importance of representation for his enterprise: “When these [parental] affections are exerted according to their intention, under the discretion of wisdom and prudence, the economy of such a family is a most delightful spectacle, and furnishes the most agreeable and affecting subjects, to the pencil of the painter, and the pen of the orator and poet” (145). Real-life affection produces a representation that in turn influences real lives, as the fiction is described as an “affecting subject.”

Happy families are central to the discourse of sentimental affection, and they are described quite specifically as spectacle. Samuel Richardson uses this tactic on a number of occasions: memorable in *Clarissa*, when Lovelace imagines “seeing” and “behold[ing]” captive Clarissa breast-feeding twin boys (706), and perfectly forgettable in *Pamela’s* sequel, when the eponymous heroine writes to her old friend Miss Darnford:

imagine you see me seated, surrounded with the joy and the hope of my future prospects, as well as my present comforts. Miss Goodwin, imagine you see, on my right hand, sitting on a velvet stool, because she is eldest, and a Miss; Billy on my left, in a little cane elbow-chair, because he is eldest, and a good boy; my Davers, and my sparkling-ey’d Pamela, with my Charley between them, on little silken cushions, at my feet, hand-in-hand, their pleased eyes looking up to my more delighted ones; and my sweet-natured promising Jemmy, in my lap; the nurses and the cradle just behind us, and the nursery maids delightedly pursuing some useful needle-work for the dear charmers of my heart – All as hush and as still as silence itself, as the pretty creatures generally are, when their little, watchful eyes see my lips beginning to open: . . . and yet all my boys are as lively as so many birds: while my

Pamela is cheerful, easy, soft, gentle, always smiling, but modest and harmless as a dove. (590-591)

Reader attention in both cases is drawn to the act of seeing as we are imaginatively transported to the family scene, becoming supplementary spectators to narrated intimacy and affection.⁴ In *La Nouvelle Héloïse* Rousseau makes clear the spectacular value of good parenting: “the picture of well-being and felicity touches the human heart, which hungers for such images” (939, my translation), each of which is a “laughing tableau” that “spreads in the soul of its spectators a secret charm that grows without cease” (941, my translation). This prepares us to correctly read Julie’s maternal affection. Her sentiments for her children are communicated to those who watch her without “the intermediary of words”; “Her eyes became entirely fixed on her three children, and her heart, ravished in delicious ecstasy, animated her charming face with the most touching tokens of motherly tenderness” (955, my translation). As observer, St. Preux is a useful narrative device through which readers are voyeuristically privy to the endless good parenting that goes on in the house at Clarens. A naturally occurring urge that is nonetheless systematically elevated to a moral imperative in the fiction of the period, good parenting is seen to reward its propagators (the parents feel good) and its objects (the children turn out well), as well as its spectators, who sentimentally partake in the family warmth that it creates.

If Stone’s theory of the companionate family is not verifiable in historical fact, it is omnipresent in eighteenth-century discourse. Joanne Bailey argues: “while there is no firm evidence to argue that affection between parents and children was growing during the eighteenth century, as Stone asserted, there is evidence that the depth of parental emotional intensity was increasingly the focus of attention in conveying the tensions and ideals of elite parenting” (211). Affectionate parents are described in various genres and with various purported functions, often in the form of tableaux held up to the gaze of readers who are evidently meant to aspire to and enact the roles that they find there.⁵ The “emo-

⁴ The use of birds to depict families seems to have been common in the period. Sarah Fielding publishes a long passage from Edward Moore’s “The Sparrow and the Dove” (from his *Fables for the Female Sex*) in *The Governess*, in which a mother dove and her offspring welcome the father back to the nest. In Fielding this scene becomes a spectacle as it is played out before a gathering of birds who are keen to find which of them is the happiest; the doves, of course, win hands down (233-236).

⁵ In *La Fibre Littéraire*, Alexandre Wenger shows how the tableau was considered to be an efficacious literary form, as it precipitated an “epiphany of sensibility” and “per-

tional intensity” on show in these discursive productions certainly served to focus attention on the ideals (if not always the tensions) of “elite parenting.”

The conduct book genre participates in this discursive landscape though its textual thrust is rarely the tableau. Example tends to take the form of anecdote, and shares the page with precept and letter; together these forms make a bid to ensure reader compliance. The different textual forms position the reader variously: anecdotes partake in the casuist tradition, and give readers the chance to witness good and bad behaviour as practice, and to experimentally cast themselves into the situations that are depicted.⁶ Precept concentrates its authority through the use of the imperative mode, or by using aphorisms to proclaim incontrovertible truths. The epistolary creates proximity between writer and reader, who is addressed with solicitous affection, and elevated to the status of privileged addressee. The letter form also contributes authenticity and announces “a natural writing, spontaneous, impulsive, a fresh and immediate projection of sentiment” (McKeon 56, Wenger 163, my translation). Finally, the letter form encodes the possibility of a reply, a way of involving the reader as an active participant in the construction of meaning. As a textual form, the epistolary is conversational and transactional and a peculiarly efficacious way of positioning the reader to be improved: addressed as if personally by a sincere and spontaneous author, she is given an, albeit illusory, right of reply. However, epistolary conduct books serve not only to cement the family with sentiment, but also to maintain the hierarchical power differential that made families into the proper components of the nation.⁷ Daniel M. Gross considers emotion as historically and socially produced in an “economy of scarcity” in order to explain “the role that rhetoric plays in routinizing communication and delineating the channels of social power” (126, 14); familial affection in conduct books plays such a role.

suaded by a narrative composition founded not on discursive reasoning, but on the solicitation of the imagination” (123, 126, my translation).

⁶ In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau finds in stories “the decorative containers of a narrativity for everyday practices” (70). The “primary role of the story” is that it “opens a legitimate theater for practical actions” (125); which is consistent with that which it adopts in the conduct book. De Certeau states that “narrated reality constantly tells us what must be believed, what must be done”; in turn, “social life multiplies the gestures and modes of behavior (*im*)printed by narrative models” (186).

⁷ For an extended discussion of the family as foundational to national wellbeing, see Botting (11, 59, 155, 195).

The conduct books I discuss are presented as letters from family members to young women in need of instruction. Two are from mothers, Sarah Pennington's *An Unfortunate Mother's Advice to her Absent Daughters* (1761) and Charles Allen's *The Polite Lady* (1775). One is from a father, John Gregory's *A Father's Legacy to his Daughters* (1774). One is from an uncle, Wetenhall Wilkes's *A Letter of Genteel and Moral Advice to a Young Lady* (1743), one is from an aunt, Hester Chapone's *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind* (1773), and one is from a sort-of aunt, John Hill's *The Conduct of a Married Life* (1753). Three are verifiably written to real family members (Pennington, Gregory and Chapone), one is probably written to such (Wilkes), and the last two are fictional discursive constructions (Allen and Hill).⁸ The focus of my analysis will be on the exchange of love and obedience as the labour of writing and reading transforms them into good advice and good conduct. First, though, it is useful to note an important aspect of epistolary familial conduct books: the way they posit the book as a replacement for the writer who is necessarily absent, and their related struggle to transcend the particularity of private epistolarity to address a general readership. These characteristics enable the advice manuals to situate their efficaciousness at the cusp of the private and the public as published but purportedly authentic letters.⁹ Written from the privacy of familial relations, the manuals are made public through publication, but they re-enter private lives in acts of intimate reading; they become public once again, as the young woman reader displays her good conduct in her bid to get the best possible husband. This end-result is made clear, for example, in the quotation with which I began this essay: Chapone's niece will best reward her aunt by "shin[ing] forth" in public as a "bright example" of good female conduct.

While in most of the texts the addressee's reception of the letters is left undescribed, *The Polite Lady* is unique in the corpus in that it is a correspondence: Sophy's letters back to her mother, Portia, are included in the book, and she expresses delight in receiving, and promises obedience to, maternal instruction. Affection is seen to acquire obedience and respect: the mother extends the former to her daughter, the daughter reciprocates with the latter, and the power differential between hierarchically positioned individuals is maintained. However, providing a

⁸ The two male-authored conduct books that ventriloquize the advice of women were published anonymously (Allen) and pseudonymously (Hill).

⁹ This resonates strongly with Michael McKeon's theory in *The Secret History of Domesticity* that one characteristic of the move towards modernity was publishing the private (see chapter two, 49-109).

voice for the daughter gives her a textual and moral existence that assumes that she needs to be persuaded to comply, rather than commanded to obey.

Perhaps it is appropriate that the text that least expresses the exchange of affection for obedience is Pennington's. A banished woman, struggling to maintain social personality under aspersions of adultery, Lady Sarah is the writer with the least power to undergird her position as authoritative purveyor of conduct advice; this may be why she uses the least expressions of affection, and if the book stipulates obedience, it is located outside the mother-daughter relationship, and is to a future husband (59, 63, 65, 67), to God (12, 14), or to both (70). Writing a *Legacy*, so addressing his daughters from beyond the grave, Gregory implies that their obedience will be motivated by his late affection for them: "You will all remember your father's fondness, when perhaps every other circumstance relating to him is forgotten. This remembrance, I hope, will induce you to give a serious attention to the advices I am now going to leave with you" (4-5). Gregory appeals to his daughters for their attention; he does not command them to obey. These are the two writers – the only historically real parents in the present corpus – whose absence from their daughters is most permanent: they are truly spectral parents.¹⁰ Gregory, though, unlike Pennington, is able to tie compliance to affection as he can rely on his daughters' having once experienced paternal fondness. Wilkes and Chapone are avuncular writers; their expectation of obedience is not strong. Nevertheless, both tie this expectation to love. Wilkes makes the link: "be but persuaded of my tender Affection to you, and then my Cautions will become agreeable" (80). Closing her first letter, Chapone uses the rhetoric of sentimental affect:

Adieu, my beloved Niece! If the feelings of your heart, whilst you read my letters, correspond with those of mine, whilst I write them, I shall not be without the advantage of your partial affection, to give weight to my advice; for believe me, my own dear girl, my heart and eyes overflow with tenderness. (30)

The production and reception of advice is located in the heart. The overflowing eyes are a legible signifier of true sentiment stored to overflowing in the heart; they underline the authenticity of the emotion (Goring 48). The emotion that is felt by the aunt and expressed by her

¹⁰ Spectral in the sense given by Marilyn Francus in *Monstrous Motherhood*: physically absent but somehow present, the texts being "compensatory for both mother [or father] and child" (173).

tears is extended to the niece, who should reciprocate with affection *and* obedience, as she is invited to “give weight to [Chapone’s] advice.”

In *The Polite Lady*, we have the most explicit illustration of how affection is exchanged for obedience. Although in *The Conduct of a Married Life* we get a sort of ghostly reader presence at the beginning of the second and third letters, where the writer refers to the addressee’s oral assent to the advice that is given (8, 22), she disappears thereafter. Chapone, Gregory, Pennington and Wilkes never mention their reader’s reactions, although they repeatedly invite proper reception. *The Polite Lady* thus stages a correspondence, with ten out of forty letters written by the daughter, an exchange that presents general readers with a model for reading, and despite that fact that the hierarchical power differential is blatantly expressed as a function of access to emotion, the daughter’s access to expression casts her as one to whom appeals for good conduct must be made. Twenty-one of the mother’s letters end with expressions of affection (4, 6, 9, 13, 16, 19, 23, 27, 30, 32, 36, 44, 68, 167, 183, 199, 221, 239, 250, 273, 275), whereas the daughter never expresses affection: all her letters end with expressions of duty, obedience, and obligation (11, 24, 33, 38, 69, 76, 98, 122, 157, 202). The absence of the daughter’s written assurances of affection do not mean that daughters cannot love their mothers. Yet in this discursive setting, filial love yields to hierarchical difference. This is emphasized by the fact that in nine out of ten letters from the daughter, she precedes her final salutation to her mother with her regards to the rest of her family, each of which reads more or less as follows: “Please to offer my duty to my papa, and my kind love to my brothers and sisters” (11; similar formulations at 24, 33, 69, 76, 122, 157, 202). It is clear that love is something that daughters can offer to their peers (siblings), but not to their superiors (parents), recalling the power structure in Adam Smith’s tableau of the happy family.

This is upheld when one looks further into the text. In all but two letters, Sophy expresses obligation to her mother, often explicitly linked to assurance that she will follow her mother’s advice: “I am greatly obliged to you for the good advice and directions you have given me, and will endeavour to conduct myself accordingly” (68). The daughter is in debt to her mother for the work of advice and she is worried that she can never pay her back: “How shall I ever repay the obligations you are daily laying upon me! I never can; nor do you expect it. The only return, I know that you desire, is, that I should, at last, become a virtuous and accomplished woman” (32). The daughter identifies the sort of work she must perform to pay her debt: the labour of reading will produce

the good conduct needed to repay her mother, who answers, in the same transactional vein:

Do not make yourself uneasy, my Dear, because you can never repay the favours I have done you. I am repaid already. I enjoy as much pleasure in bestowing them, as you can possibly do in receiving them; and if I should have the additional happiness to see you become a polite and virtuous woman, I shall be doubly rewarded. (34)

Different things (love, pleasure, duty, good behaviour) are transformed by labour into items that can be exchanged and consumed. In *The Culture of Sensibility*, G. J. Barker Benfield quotes Norbert Elias to show how the “the growth of demands for unified mobile means of exchange” in the eighteenth century enabled people to take consumer pleasure in their own private feelings (80, 83).¹¹ The private emotions of parental affection and filial gratitude become exchangeable once they have become mixed with the reciprocal labours of writing and reading.

Sentimental expressions of love and joy mask the more pragmatic motivation for the deployment of affection. Having received news about Sophy’s improvement Portia writes:

To say I was glad on this occasion, is flat and unmeaning; I was over-joyed; I felt an emotion of pleasure known only to those who have a daughter of their own whom they love with the same warmth of affection. Go on, my dear Sophy, thus to encrease the happiness of your mother . . . by making yourself a complete mistress of your needle. (30)

Hyperbolic, even bathetic, the rhetoric is also sentimental, as the mother’s satisfaction with her daughter’s advancement is located in a positive emotion felt in the heart, and in describing her joy she reaches limits of expression, a stylistic feature frequently found in sentimental fiction. The mother repeatedly expresses her intense positive emotions at her daughter’s continuing and expanding good conduct:

I believe, you have such a tender regard for my happiness, that, when once you know how greatly it depends on your good behaviour, you will never lessen it by a contrary conduct. And now, after this flow of parental affection, I come to give you my best advice with regard to the choice of your friends. (39)

¹¹ Barker Benfield cites *Power and Civility*, pp. 78-85.

The relation between “parental affection” and good conduct is made evident as the former – described as a “flow” – not only propels the ensuing good advice, but somehow produces it as an extension of its own existence. Parental affection produces good advice; good advice deployed on a “flow of parental affection” produces obedient good conduct; good conduct secures parental happiness, which in turn reinvigorates parental affection. Portia makes this productive dynamic clear:

My dear Sophy, How shall I express the joy I received from the perusal of your last letter! How happy am I in having a daughter, who, at an age, when most young ladies imagine they can think and act for themselves, is so humble and dutiful, as to undertake nothing without the permission and advice of her mother! But can't I conceal my joy within my own breast? Or, if it must have vent, can't I be satisfied with imparting it to others? Why tell it to my daughter? Why, my Dear, I tell it to you for two reasons: both because I like to think of you, and talk to you, and also because I am persuaded it will be an additional motive to your persevering in the same virtuous course. For, I believe, you have such a tender regard for my happiness, that, when once you know how greatly it depends on your good behaviour, you will never lessen it by a contrary conduct. (38-39)

The virtuous circle of love (transformed into and made manifest as good advice) buying obedience (transformed into and made manifest as good conduct), is, one suspects, infinite, as one *Polite Lady* breeds another through the exchange of letters, and perhaps many more, as the exchange is publicized throughout the nation.¹² In the end, the exchange of letters has lasted something over ten years, from when Sophy first goes to boarding school and learns to read and then write, to when she spends time in “the world” (i.e. London) with an aunt and cousins. It peters off without telling us if she makes a successful marriage, so we are not able to assess if Sophy has been able to capitalize on her mother's affectionate investment.

By giving Sophy a voice *The Polite Lady* plays on two fronts. The fact of giving the daughter the right to reply to her mother promotes mutual companionate sociability as the cement of happy families; ultimately, though, as she is never shown to disagree with her mother, *The Polite Lady* does not really move in the emancipatory direction that Mary Wollstonecraft longed for in family relations some decades later. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft deplores the tyranny

¹² *The Polite Lady* was a fairly popular conduct manual, with eight editions between 1760 and 1798 indicated in the *English Short Title Catalogue*, including two in Dublin and one in Philadelphia that were probably pirated, a strong signal of print-market success.

and abjection that habitually characterized relations between parents and children. When Sophy explicitly eschews reason in favour of blind obedience, stating: “I think myself bound in duty to obey all your orders, whether I understand the reasonableness of them or not” (36-37), she promotes what Wollstonecraft calls “the absurd duty . . . of obeying a parent only on account of his being a parent,” an attitude that “shackles the mind, and prepares it for a slavish submission to any power but reason” (235-6). Perhaps the move to publish a correspondence rather than a one-sided series of letters was a better way of preserving parental hegemony; indeed, as readers are exposed to Sophy’s abject compliance, they might find it difficult to project alternative, less docile responses. Giving an actual voice to the daughter, rather than the possibility of response to the reader, is a way of closing off the emancipatory potential of the epistolary advice manual. Yet when Sophy writes her answers and other readers no longer have to perform the work of reading, they may instead close the conduct book in disgust, exclaiming against such “slavish submission” (Wollstonecraft 236).

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