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Sexual Innocence and Economic Experience: the Problems of Amelia and Ophelia

David Simple and The Countess of Dellwyn demonstrate how criticism and modification of the sentimental system can take place via an economically able, but still sensible, woman. This pattern becomes, in slightly different ways, a crucial feature of both Henry Fielding’s Amelia (1751) and Sarah Fielding’s The History of Ophelia (1760). In this chapter, I explore ideas of femininity and the nature of their relation to economic activity. As these novels illustrate, the relation between these two is not only complex, it is also in the early stages of a process of change – a process which will, as the century progresses, enable connections to be made between areas where previously none was possible, thus altering the dynamics of the relationships among femininity, sensibility and economic activity.

When Mrs Bilson stepped out of the domestic sphere to earn her family’s living and pay their debts, she helped to forge a new connection in fiction – between herself, as sensible female, and economic (that is, business managerial) activity. In order to do this, as has been noted, it was necessary already to have placed her carefully as an exemplar on the other, domestic, economic front. Lack of domestic economic ability could render a woman’s virtue questionable: in her Narrative of her life (1755), the actress Charlotte Charke attributes much of her later ‘oddity’ to this lack when she admits that, had she paid more attention to her needle, it ‘would have rendered me less troublesome in a Family, and more useful to myself, and those about me’.¹ Her adult life of morally dubious ‘Vagabondizing’ is the inevitable result of a masculine education involving, among other things, Latin and the use of guns. However, as this indicates, it is not simply her inability to perform the domestic tasks conventionally

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allotted to women that condemns Charke, but also her pursuit of extra-domestic activity *per se*, which was generally seen as inherently immoral in a woman. As James Fordyce warned young women: ‘if a young person ... will always be breaking loose through each domestic inclosure, and ranging at large the wide common of the world, those destroyers [i.e. ‘the worst men’] will see her in a very different point of light. They will consider her as lawful game...’ Any activity beyond the ‘domestic inclosure’ becomes, by definition, immoral activity, and automatically deprives the woman of any of the protection supposedly afforded by her rightful sphere.3

Thus one of the most obvious kinds of extra-domestic activity, earning money in ‘the wide common of the world’, was not the province of a respectable female; on the contrary, the economic role of such a woman lay within the home, dutifully ‘improving and securing’ her husband’s fortune.4 Correspondingly, I want to argue that in much eighteenth-century writing it is possible to discern an inherent identification of the woman who either chooses or is forced to be financially independent with the sexually immoral woman.

Historical accounts of women and work have found the area one of great difficulty. Chris Middleton has written that

> It is one of the curiosities of historiography that ... women’s contribution to economic life appears to be perpetually on the wane. Histories of every period (at least until the present century) depict women as undergoing a process of rapidly advancing economic marginality, yet those of subsequent periods attest with equal conviction to women’s economic vigour and importance at the start of their own age.5

In *Women, Work and Sexual Politics in Eighteenth-Century England* (1989) Bridget Hill agrees that there is a need to review some of the conclusions drawn by Ivy Pinchbeck, the pioneer in eighteenth-century women’s history. Nevertheless she maintains with Pinchbeck, and in fulfilment of Middleton’s pattern, that, ‘In the eighteenth-century as strictly defined, there seems little doubt that women lost out as far as opportunities for work are concerned.’6 Whatever the historical reality, there is at least evidence for a contemporary *perception* that employment possibilities for women were becoming scarcer as the century progressed. For example, in support of her view that London in particular saw a rise in crime