Ladies, Gentlemen, and Servants: Virtue and the Domestic Ideal

Virtue is an amorphous quality, based as it is upon culturally assigned and constructed notions of conduct and morality; however, several definitions of virtue were in circulation in eighteenth-century England, most of which depended upon the individual’s class, sex, and religious belief, though other traits and characteristics could inform the type and level of virtue possessed. All definitions of virtue referenced, influenced, informed, and reinforced each other, yet all species of virtue, as articulated and understood in eighteenth-century England, were defined in relation to patrician virtue and Christian virtue. (When speaking of class, I employ it, as J. C. D. Clark does, to mean “rank, order, station, degree and calling.”)

In terms of class, virtue and the virtuous body had originally been the sole province of the aristocrat, as Michael McKeon, in The Origins of the English Novel, writes:

The traditional terms of social distinction in early modern England—“degree,” “estate,” “order,” “rank”—are variously based on an idea of status derived from the personal possession, or nonpossession, of honor. And honor is a quality that points, through the crucial mediation of repute, both outward and inward. On the one hand, it is a function of ancestry and lineage; less obligatory, but likely to confirm the primary facts of ancestry, are other external circumstances like wealth and political power. On the other hand, honor is an essential and inward property of its possessor, that which the conditional or extrinsic signifiers of honor exist to signify. In this respect, honor is equivalent to an internal element of “virtue”. The notion of honor as a unity of outward circumstance and inward essence is the most fundamental justification for the hierarchical stratification of society.
by status, and it is so fundamental as to be largely tacit. What it asserts is that the social order is not circumstantial and arbitrary, but corresponds to and expresses an analogous, intrinsic moral order.

Virtue as defined by patrician ideology is based upon “ancestry and lineage,” and it literally becomes embodied in the aristocrat. Someone from the middle or lower stations could not, under this definition, be in possession of virtue nor lay claim to a virtuous body, at least not to the full extent that the aristocrat could.

Yet the question remains as to what extent a female, aristocratic or not, could possess or participate in this type of virtue. While based on birth and ancestry, aristocratic virtue is, first and foremost, about masculine honor, relying as it does upon the systems of patrilineage, primogeniture, and entail, to ensure both the transmission of honor and its outward trappings, from one generation to the next; within such systems, the locus of female honor must always be chastity, as it is the only way to assure that male ancestral honor is maintained and lineage secured. In addition, aristocratic virtue was consolidated through and performed by external displays of wealth and political power, to which women primarily gained access through marriage. For women, virtue proceeded from their relationships with men, fathers and husbands, and this is born out by the fact that women took on the social station of the men they married, though with something of a nod to paternal rank. As Anne Laurence writes, “Women in early modern England were defined firstly by their sex, secondly by their relationship to a man, and thirdly by their class, or, rather, the status they assumed from their fathers or husbands.” Even the redoubtable Bess of Hardwick initially accrued and later consolidated and expanded her considerable wealth and power through a series of politically strategic marriages. Thus, a woman of noble birth could claim a larger portion of honor and virtue than, say, a woman of the lower orders, but her honor and virtue would always be subsidiary to and defined by the stock of virtue possessed by and through husband and father.

In many ways, the gentry were seen to possess virtue equal to or greater than that of the peerage. As Donald Greene writes, “If a peerage was generally testimony that its holder or some not very distant ancestor had been one of ‘the new men’—a clever operator in business, land, or politics, or a professional man whose talent or luck had enabled him to climb the ladder of success—those who considered themselves the genuine old aristocracy of England, the backbone of the nation, the true hundred-per-cent Englishmen were the ‘gentry.’” Greene further notes that “Even as late as the twentieth century, heads of such families