

## Part III

# The Eighteenth Century

Eighteenth-century England was said to be paradise for women, purgatory for horses and hell for servants. In reality, however, the situation for women was probably more repressive than it had been in previous centuries. Legally, there was little improvement. Lord Hardwicke's Marriage Act of 1753 turned marriage into a civil contract, but the measure had little effect on the actual status of women. A private Act of Parliament was still needed for a divorce; women were not legal entities, and were classed together with 'wards, lunatics, idiots and outlaws'.<sup>55</sup> They continued to be excluded from public and political life, although some women exerted an influence behind the scenes. Open 'petticoat government', however, was universally abhorred. Despite their powerlessness, some women engaged in political pamphleteering, and it was even fashionable for ladies to indicate their party allegiance by the spot on which they stuck their beauty patches. In the course of the century girls gradually gained a greater say in the choice of their spouses, affectionate marriages became the rule, and the relationship between parents and children became less formal.

As regards work, the situation undoubtedly became more difficult for independent-minded women. The spirit of enterprise in all fields of life, leading to the modernisation and rationalisation of production to increase profit, was turning Britain into a modern,

capitalist economy. But the resulting split between workplace and home, and the decline in small landholdings, severed women from the production process. Many domestic goods, from candles to cloth and beer, were no longer made at home, but industrially, and women's managerial functions were no longer needed. Because of the increasing wealth of the bourgeoisie, who were intent on emulating the aristocracy, the need for middle-class female labour to supplement the family income declined. It was considered to be a sign of gentility that the wife of a rich merchant or craftsman should not have to work. Hence, bourgeois women were adjuncts to rather than working members of the family and leisure became their usual condition. From being producers, they turned into consumers. The main duties of a lady were to obey her husband and to produce an heir. Eighteenth-century women bore up to 20 children, but middle- and upper-class women had little to do with child rearing or even education. The pointlessness and artificiality of their lives are evinced by the grotesque fashions of hooped skirts which forced the wearers to go sideways through open doors, and of giant hairdos half a metre high and in danger of catching fire from the chandeliers.

In accordance with the new ideal of refined leisure, schools mainly taught female accomplishments designed to increase a girl's value on the marriage market, and though moralists like Steele and Addison protested against the frivolity and triviality of the idle lady of the age, few advocated serious intellectual training for women, and many of those who frequented the salons of famous women of letters were downright misogynist in their sneers at women who trespassed beyond their proper sphere – not least Pope and Johnson, the latter likening female preachers to dogs walking on their hind legs.

With nothing left to do, some women dedicated themselves to various humanitarian causes, from the abolition of slavery to the reclaiming of prostitutes, activities which were considered compatible with women's alleged moral superiority and tenderness of heart. This cult of sensibility was intended to compensate for women's complete lack of public function. They were talked into believing themselves endowed with the gift of feeling, which became a virtue in itself for women. The upsurge of feminist thought at the beginning of the eighteenth century was stifled by this cult of sentimentalism, which gave women an illusionary status

and importance denied them in reality. Since custom now decreed separate spheres for men and women, it was but a small step to believe that men and women were different in nature, and that the weaker sex was constitutionally unfit for the more arduous tasks in the commercial world outside the home. Domesticity, sensitivity and selflessness were held to be natural female attributes. More than ever, a woman's place was the home and the family.

Men considered it requisite to protect women from all forms of 'indecenty' (and indecenty almost invariably meant sex), to drape togas around statues and veils over painted nudes, and to censor their language when ladies were present. To be sure, it was still considered completely natural that a man should sow his wild oats, and for upper-class males even open liaisons were not uncommon; easily available pornography and widespread prostitution were the reverse side of this growing prudishness and recoiling from sexuality.

For respectable women, this cult of sentimentalism involved a corseted self-image and restricted subject matter in both conversation and writing, since every syllable and gesture had to prove their perfect modesty, passivity, chastity and moral elevation. Wit was associated with the immorality of the Restoration period. Sexually liberated playwrights like Behn, Manley and Centlivre were castigated as 'Vice's friends, and Virtue's female foes'.<sup>56</sup> Thus, decorum left women writers with little linguistic ammunition to counter misogynist diatribes and assert their birthrights to a place in the literary marketplace. To be sure, female authors had ceased to be novelties and to excite immediate curiosity and hostility. But in a climate in which a woman's nature was defined as reticent, self-sacrificing and homely, publishing work and competing on the literary circuit required a woman to justify herself, with regard to both the public and herself, while writers like Behn, the Female Wits and even Centlivre, despite vicious attacks, had regarded such competition as a natural claim.

The theatre retained its dubious moral image. Actresses by now were well established, even though quite a few were notorious for their private lives, such as Eliza Haywood, Charlotte Charke or 'Perdita' Robinson, while others, like Elizabeth Inchbald, had unblemished reputations. There were also stories about the backstage sexual harassment of actresses and female playwrights. Audiences were still rowdy. Drury Lane was wrecked by riots in 1743, 1750,

1755, 1763, 1770 and 1776, and the star actor cum theatre manager David Garrick had to apologise on his knees for performing a play different from the one billed.<sup>57</sup>

After William III's ascension to the throne, Court patronage had declined. During the reign of Queen Anne several patents were granted to new houses, so that a number of fringe theatres opened at the beginning of the century, of which Fielding's in the Haymarket was to become the most important. The first two Georges, known as Duncce I and Duncce II, unable to speak English, were not interested in the theatre. But the omnipotent Prime Minister Robert Walpole cracked down on the political opposition which had used plays to ridicule and attack him by introducing a Licensing Act in 1737 stipulating that every play performed had to be vetted by a censor. This measure killed political theatre and gagged dramatists, some of whom, like Fielding, turned to the novel instead. Even more significant, however, was that the Licensing Act limited legitimate drama to Drury Lane and Covent Garden, a new theatre opened in 1732, with the Haymarket serving as a summer stage for light entertainment. Any other commercial performance of plays in London was prohibited, though ingenious people tried to get around this measure by staging plays as puppet shows, or charging entrance for musical entertainments and giving a play in between, 'free of charge'. Occasionally, new plays were also premiered at Exeter or Bath, where fashionable society moved during the summer months, when the legitimate theatres in London were closed. Dublin, too, had a theatre of some importance. However, performing in the provinces was not really a viable alternative, since sizeable audiences were to be had in London only, which remained the unrivalled centre of the theatrical world throughout the eighteenth century. The provinces were toured by strolling players. Therefore, the new regulation drastically limited the market for new plays and eliminated competition, since the two privileged London stages were happy enough to divide the market between themselves. Managers preferred to put on old hits rather than new and untried plays, and aspiring playwrights had to please not only the town but also the managers of the two patented theatres to make a career.

Dramatists still depended for their income on benefit nights, and some complained that the all-powerful managers had contrived to premier their plays late in the season, when the upper classes were

leaving London and the theatres were half empty, and had then pocketed the full profit when the play was taken up again in the next season. Only at the end of the century did celebrated dramatists begin to bargain for lump sums for their scripts. It also became usual in the eighteenth century to have special benefit nights for actors, who could choose the play they wanted performed for this occasion.

Augustan audiences could choose from a wide variety of entertainments, including such blood-thirsty spectacles as cock-fighting and bear-baiting, apart from various hybrid forms of theatre. Throughout the century dramatists complained about new audience tastes, from Italian opera to pantomimes and all kinds of circus shows. The legitimate stages catered to these vulgar tastes by adding a comic afterpiece to every performance, which would release the less sophisticated spectators from the rigours of a *King Lear* or *Venice Preserved*. Such afterpieces could be one-act farces, harlequinades, fairytale romances or potted legitimate plays distilled to a few effective scenes. Odd as the custom may seem nowadays, it provided women playwrights with some opportunity to make money by complying with this demand for superficial spectacles, as well as parodying its excesses.