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The Sin of Laura: The Meaning of Culture in the Education of Nineteenth-Century Women

Marjorie R. Theobald

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Article abstract

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This paper considers the rise of the accomplishments curriculum as a precursor to the emergence, late in the nineteenth century, of the “worthwhile education” of women. This earlier development, in the author's view, requires a reconsideration of that sacred cow of feminist theory, the man/culture, women/nature dichotomy. A study of the female accomplishments also illustrates the earlier rise of the enduring and oppressive myth that there is a natural affinity between the humanities and the female mind — with its equally enduring implication that there is a natural affinity between science and the male mind.

Historians of the Edwardian period have noted that the rational, scientific frame of mind, which underpinned the capitalist exploitation of the natural world, was considered to be a "natural" male predilection. Feminist historians have rightly exposed the use of this pseudo-science as a justification of the contemporary intellectual subjugation of women. They have, however, failed to note that intellectual attitudes which were evident more than a century earlier, and which underpinned the emergence of the female accomplishments, ensured that women would be excluded from the great intellectual adventure of the twentieth century.

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The Sin of Laura: The Meaning of Culture in the Education of Nineteenth-Century Women

MARJORIE R. THEOBALD

Résumé

In the iconography of nineteenth-century female education, the central figure is a woman at the piano. This figure embodies a form of education, the female "accomplishments" — music, art, modern languages, literature, and the natural sciences — which was widespread in Britain by the end of the eighteenth century and which spread rapidly throughout the English-speaking world. Yet this form of education has been overlooked or dismissed by both mainstream and feminist historiography.

This paper considers the rise of the accomplishments curriculum as a precursor to the emergence, late in the nineteenth century, of the "worthwhile education" of women. This earlier development, in the author's view, requires a reconsideration of that sacred cow of feminist theory, the man/culture, women/nature dichotomy. A study of the female accomplishments also illustrates the earlier rise of the enduring and oppressive myth that there is a natural affinity between the humanities and the female mind — with its equally enduring implication that there is a natural affinity between science and the male mind.

Historians of the Edwardian period have noted that the rational, scientific frame of mind, which underpinned the capitalist exploitation of the natural world, was considered to be a "natural" male predilection. Feminist historians have rightly exposed the use of this pseudo-science as a justification of the contemporary intellectual subjugation of women. They have, however, failed to note that intellectual attitudes which were evident more than a century earlier, and which underpinned the emergence of the female accomplishments, ensured that women would be excluded from the great intellectual adventure of the twentieth century.

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L'éducation féminine du XIXe siècle a traditionnellement été personnifiée par une femme au piano, laquelle représente une forme d'éducation, soit les «talents» féminins tels que la musique, les beaux-arts, les langues vivantes, la littérature et les sciences naturelles. À la fin du XVIIIe siècle, cet enseignement était déjà fort répandu en Angleterre et dans tout le monde anglo-saxon, mais les historiens traditionnels et les spécialistes de l'histoire des femmes l'ont soit ignoré, soit rejeté.

On verra dans cet article que l'accumulation des connaissances féminines a donné naissance à l'éducation «utile» des femmes, à la fin du XIXe siècle. Selon l'auteur, cette éducation remet en question l'une des vérités fondamentales de la pensée féministe, l'opposition de l'homme-culture à celle de la femme-nature. L'analyse de l'éducation féminine permet aussi de voir surgir ce mythe persistant et oppressif de la prétendue

affinité naturelle entre les sciences humaines et l'esprit féminin, ainsi que son corollaire sur l'appropriation de la science par l'esprit masculin.

Au début du XXe siècle, les historiens croyaient que la logique scientifique sous-jacente à l'exploitation capitaliste des ressources naturelles était l'apanage de l'homme. Les historiens féministes ont, avec raison, vu dans ce raisonnement pseudo-scientifique une rationalisation intellectuelle de l'oppression de la femme. Ils ont cependant négligé de noter que ce sont les attitudes intellectuelles adoptées plus d'un siècle auparavant qui ont empêché les femmes de participer aux grandes découvertes du XXe siècle.

In Henry Handel Richardson's Australian novel, *The Getting of Wisdom*, Laura and her friends are invited to the principal's drawing-room at nineteenth-century Presbyterian Ladies' College in Melbourne. In her turn she is called upon to perform:

> Laura took the volume of Thalberg she had brought with her, selected "Home, Sweet Home," and pranced in. Her audience kept utter silence; but, had she been a little sharper, she would have grasped that it was the silence of amazement. After the prim sonatinas that had gone before, Thalberg's florid ornaments had a shameless sound. Her performance, moreover, was a startling one; the forte pedal was held down throughout; the big chords were crashed and banged with all the strength a pair of twelve-year-old arms could put into them; and wrong notes were freely scattered. Still, rhythm and melody were well marked, and there was no mistaking the agility of the small fingers. Dead silence, too, greeted the conclusion of the piece. Several girls were very red, from trying not to laugh. The Principal tugged at his moustache, in an abstracted fashion.... Music was as fatal to Laura's equilibrium as wine would have been.[1]

Laura, who was new to the school and anxious to be accepted, did not know that anything was amiss, until next morning after breakfast she was summoned into the presence of the Lady-Superintendent, Mrs Gurley. A quarter of an hour later, when she emerged from that lady's private sitting-room, "her eyes were mere swollen slits in her face ... Mrs Gurley had crushed and humiliated her." This paper is a historical exploration of Laura's sin.

In the iconography of nineteenth-century female education, a central figure is the woman at the piano. The setting is always the middle-class drawing-room, not the concert hall; the woman is represented as a passive figure, the object of the gaze outside the frame.[2] While such portraits of women and girls are legion, there are few depicting men at the piano, even though public performance and musical composition were the prerogatives of men. So powerful was the cultural symbol of the woman at the piano that for nineteenth-century daughters throughout the Western world, learning the instrument became a bench-mark of gentility, on a par with the employment of servants and attendance at a private school. In colonial Australia, where religious bigotry was itself an art form, the Protestant ascendancy sent its daughters to Catholic convents to learn the piano if no other teachers were available.

1. Henry Handel Richardson, *The Getting of Wisdom* (1910; London, 1970), 82-83.
2. See, for example, *The Duet: A Drawing-Room Study* (1872), reproduced in Joan N. Burstyn, *Victorian Education and the Ideal of Womanhood* (London, 1980), between pp. 98-99.

The woman at the piano was the central icon of a tradition of education which has, until recently, been overlooked or treated with disdain in both mainstream and feminist historiography of education.[3] Yet the so-called female accomplishments of music, art, modern languages, literature, and natural science were firmly entrenched in Britain by the end of the eighteenth century. They were sufficiently well established as a coherent pedagogical form to be noted by the acerbic English clergyman Sydney Smith in 1810: "A decided and prevailing taste for one or another mode of education there must be. A century past it was for housewifery - now it is for accomplishments."[4] This remarkably uniform programme of studies owed nothing to the prescriptions of church, state, or examining body, and was readily exported to the English-speaking world in the cultural baggage of British women.

It is part of the hidden history of migration that women of learning and culture began to arrive in cities like Melbourne from its beginnings as a white settlement. They came, bringing with them an unwritten archive of teaching experience at no cost to the public purse. Lady-principals, teachers, and governesses left the overcrowded market of female employment in Britain to begin afresh in the colonies. They were agents of a voluntarist tradition of female education peculiarly suited to a scattered and mobile colonial society in the making. Women came from a lifetime of school-teaching in London, Dublin, Edinburgh, and the fashionable provincial cities of Bath and Brighton. The ladies' academy arrived in the colonies as an integral part of the middle-class family enterprise, the manner of its coming as various as the circumstances and motives of the emigrants themselves. Such schools supported husbands, fathers, brothers, and sons as they struggled to gain a toe-hold in the professional, mercantile, and artistic worlds, as they took up land, went in search of gold, or came as a last resort to the patronage of a lowly paid government position. Sometimes the school remained when the colonial family adventure had run its course and husband and wife has gone their separate ways.

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3. There is a small, but growing, body of work which takes a more scholarly look at women's education in the accomplishments tradition: see, for example, Marjorie R. Theobald, "Women and Schools in Colonial Victoria 1840-1910," PhD diss., Monash University, 1985; my articles "'Mere accomplishments'? Melbourne's Early Girls' Schools Reconsidered," *History of Education Review* 13: 2 (1984): 15-28; "Julie Vieusseux: The Lady-Principal and Her School," in *Double Time: women in Victoria - 150 Years*, eds. Marilyn Lake and Farley Kelly (Melbourne, 1985), 78-86; "The Accomplished Woman and the Propriety of Intellect: A New Look at Women's Education in Britain and Australia, 1800-1850," *History of Education Review* 17: 1 (1988): 21-35; Deborah Gorham, *The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal* (London, 1982); J.S. Pedersen, "The Reform of Women's Secondary and Higher Education: Institutional Change and Social Values in Mid and Late Victorian England," *History of Education Quarterly* (Spring 1979): 61-92; Clive Binfield, *Belmont's Portias: Victorian Non-Conformists and Middle-Class Education for Girls* (London, 1981); Margaret Bryant, "Reflections on the Nature of Education for Women and Girls," in *The Education of Girls and Women*, Proceedings of the 1984 Annual Conference of the History of Education Society of Great Britain, ed. J. Purvis (London, 1985); Marion Amies, "Home Education and Colonial Ideals of Womanhood," PhD diss., Monash University, 1986; Alison Prentice, "Scholarly Passion: Two Persons Who Caught It," *Historical Studies in Education/Revue d'histoire de l'éducation* 1: 1 (1989): 7-28.
4. Sydney Smith, *Essays, by Sydney Smith: Reprinted From the Edinburgh Review 1802-1818* (London, 1874), 187.

The female accomplishments tradition came to the Australian colonies with the emigrant female household and with impecunious but enterprising spinsters under the auspices of Maria Rye and the Female Middle-Class Emigration Society.[5] It came with the carefully educated wives, sisters, and daughters of the intelligentsia — the university professors, the clergy, and the scientific community. It came with the female teaching orders from Ireland and France after the education acts of the 1870s and 1880s cut off state aid to the Catholic Church in most Australian states. It was a tradition immeasurably enriched by the flow of cultured and urbane emigrés from the political and religious turmoil of midcentury Europe.

Under the most unlikely circumstances, colonial women also continued their education for its own sake. For the great majority, study took the form of the female accomplishments of music, painting, modern languages, English language and literature, and natural science. Nor to my knowledge did the generality of women hanker after men's studies, despite the oft-repeated anecdotes which tell us that it was so.[6] If there was, in the nineteenth century, an invisible college of gentlemen scientists, there was also an invisible college of female studies.[7] Many women continued after school days to attend adult classes in the ladies' academies, or to take private lessons from masters in the traditional accomplishments. Eliza à Beckett recorded in her autobiography:

> My school days ended when I returned home. I had music and drawing lessons at Mrs. Vieusseux's school, then the best in Melbourne, once or twice a week. She was our teacher in the latter — an expert in soft crayon work, mainly heads of girls of varying types of beauty. I sketched, or tried to sketch, the outlines, then "Madame" would seat herself in my place, correct what was wrong, spend a good half hour with black chalk and "stumps" to soften it down, and I would see a charming picture emerging from my crude beginnings. I brought the finished specimens home and they were duly framed and admired, but no more my work than the framer's. I never pretended they were, and was as little capable of drawing anything at the end of my course as at the beginning.... I did a great deal of desultory reading during my girlhood, kept up my French, and with the Jennings studied German with Mr. Bunny.[8]

Eliza's education as an artist captures one aspect of female accomplishment to which I will return, but care should be taken in the interpretation of her memoirs. She also educated her own daughter, Alice, and notes that "till the time of her engagement we

5. For an account of the latter, see A. James Hammerton, *Emigrant Gentlewomen: Genteel Poverty and Female Emigration 1830-1914* (Canberra, 1979).
6. Frances Power Cobbe and Anna Swanwick have been pressed into service many times. See, for example, Kathleen Fitzpatrick, *PLC Melbourne: The First Century 1875-1975* (Melbourne, 1975), Chap. 2.
7. I am using the term "invisible college" in the sense defined by Carol Cooper in her article "Reynell Eveleigh Johns: A Rediscovered Victorian," *La Trobe Library Journal* 5: 20 (1977): 95, n.4 — the chain of communication which lay behind the dispersal of information and which stimulated further discovery and thought. In the situation of a new colony, it began with the passing on of information and contacts by hearsay, and later developed into the more formal channels of intercourse offered by the "learned societies."
8. La Trobe Library, Melbourne. MS 9034, Eliza Chomley Memoirs, pp.5-6. For Julie Vieusseux's school, see Theobald, "Julie Vieusseux."

used to read English, French and German together — good modern literature in French. *The Private Secretary* I remember among other recent writings — in German — as well as Schiller's tragedies."

The *Clyde Company Papers*, an extensive published collection concerning the Australian pastoral empire of the Scottish brothers, Philip and George Russell, documents the determination of women to continue their studies even in the unpromising environment of early Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania).[9] Ties of kinship, friendship, and intellectual companionship united this remarkable group of women: the Russell wives, Sophia, Euphemia, and Annie; Mrs. Henry Jennings, mother of Sophia; Mrs. James Comrie, aunt of Annie Russell of Carngham; Mary Reid of Ratho near Boswell and her young widowed daughter, Jane Williams; the pastoralist, Anne Drysdale, who was related by marriage to the Russells; and Frances Campbell and her sister, Anna Learmonth. Frequently isolated from each other for long periods and preoccupied with the daily business of survival, they corresponded on the qualifications and suitability of prospective governesses or the prospects of the ladies' schools which appeared in Van Diemen's Land as early as the 1830s. Mary Reid wrote to her daughter from Ratho in 1834:

> I had a visit yesterday of a Lady who wishes to take up school in Bothwell; she is the daughter-in-law of old Nicholas, having married his eldest son who had been in the army, sold out, and become a bookseller; was unfortunate, and brought his family out here about a month ago. She is represented as an accomplished woman — had been ten years in Lady Charlotte Hamilton's family, and had been their only teacher; if her terms are moderate she will be a great acquisition to us. Four of the Misses Schaw and Elizabeth and Mary will probably go as day scholars.[10]

For the sake of their education and prospects, the Clyde Company daughters, nieces, younger sisters, and daughters of friends and business acquaintances passed from one household to another. Anne Drysdale had Jane Thomson, daughter of Dr. Alexander Thomson of Geelong, living with her at Boronggoop Station in 1841. In December of that year she invited Charlotte Fisher to "come here and be taught along with Jane; she is a very fine girl, and there are no schools, so it will be a great advantage to her."[11] Like all the women in the Clyde Company circle, Anne Drysdale still found time to read steadily — on board ship in 1839, Lamartine's *Travels in the Holy Land* (translated by another intriguing school-keeper in early Melbourne, the aristocratic Anne Gilbert), Prout's Bridgewater Treatise, and Stephen's travels in Greece, Turkey, Russia, and Poland.[12] The partner in her Boston marriage, Caroline Newcomb, had arrived in Van Diemen's Land in 1833 and gone with the founder of Melbourne, John Batman, to the Port Phillip District (Victoria) in 1836 as governess to his children, giving her the distinction of being the first white teacher in the colony.[13]

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9. P.L. Brown, ed., *Clyde Company Papers (CCP)* (London, 1952).
10. Ibid., 1: 194-95.
11. Ibid., 3: 142-43,219.
12. Ibid., 2: 307-08.
13. Douglas Pike, ed. for vols. 1-5, *Australian Dictionary of Biography (ADB)*, 12 vols. (Melbourne, 1966), 1: 330-31.

Mrs. James Comrie had two nieces with her in Sydney in 1855. They had a morning governess for French and drawing three times a week, and studied music and singing with Ernest Spagnoletti, a leading singer in Sydney in the 1850s and 1860s. Their aunt wrote to Jane Williams: "It is a valuable opportunity for them, and we hope their own good sense and desire for improvement may induce them to make the best of it. They are nice girls, and although they have formed some singular notions of men and things from their home education and want of experience, they have good sense and perhaps may gradually adopt less contracted views."[14]

The life-long studies of Mrs. Annie Russell, cousin by marriage to George and Philip Russell, "partook a little of a severe turn" — reading (especially the lives of the pious), poetry writing, and the study of languages. In company with her women friends, she committed to memory long pieces of poetry and undertook Herculean tasks of French and English grammar and geography. She was also an accomplished musician. In turn, Annie Russell sent her daughter from Carngham to live with Mrs. Jennings in Melbourne.[15]

Jane Williams's journal documents her pleasure in the public lectures which were one of the few intellectual diversions for the early settlers in Van Diemen's Land. She writes up her notes on a lecture about optics and adds "it is really astonishing to see such things in so young a settlement; it is most pleasing, and I trust and pray that all knowledge will be sought by us that it may enlarge our minds, improve our understandings, and lead us to adore and love the Wonderful Being into Whoes [sic] glorious Works, knowledge enables us to look."[16]

Three years later, on a visit to Edinburgh, Jane studied French every morning for two hours and went to oil-painting lessons in the afternoons.[17] She deplored the incessant paying and receiving of visits which life in Edinburgh necessitated, complaining that "the evening is too short for me to prepare my French lessons and answer all my correspondents."

The study of botany, which was readily accessible to the amateur and had a natural affinity with painting and sketching, was considered a suitable pastime for women, as the present publishing fashion in facsimile private journals illustrates. While it was acceptable that a woman should "educate flowers, make friendships with birds, and pick up plants," the letters and notebooks of nineteenth-century scientists reveal that the informed participation of women was crucial in the identification and codification of Australian flora and fauna.[18] The collaboration between the lonely and desperate

14. Brown, *CCP*, 6: 271.
15. Ibid., 7: 342-46.
16. Ibid., 2: 11.
17. Ibid., 2: 195-96.
18. The quotation is from Sydney Smith, 96; Sally Gregory Kohlstedt, "In From the Periphery: American Women in Science, 1830-1880," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 4: 1 (Autumn 1978): 81-96. This edition was dedicated to women, science, and society. In a paper on the same subject delivered to the Melbourne Inter-University Women's Studies Research Seminar in June 1983, Kohlstedt suggested that the correspondence of scientists held

Georgiana Molloy in Augusta, Western Australia, and the English gentleman scientist James Mangles is a case in point.[19] The daughters of John Cotton assisted their father in the collection, preparation, and recording of the flora and fauna on the Doogallook Station in the 1840s. Cotton was a man of wide culture, an artist, naturalist, and writer, and a fellow of the Royal Zoological Society of England. He had published *Resident Song Birds of Great Britain* in London in 1835, his list of Victorian birds appeared in the *Tasmanian Journal of Natural Science* in 1848, and he was working towards a book on Australian birds and animals at the time of his death in 1849. Cotton's letters to his brother in England often refer to the family's interest in the natural history of the area: "Our occupations are much the same as usual. The younger branches are engaged in the forenoon attending their lessons, the afternoon is occupied in searching for insects, flowers, etc. We have now a tolerable collection of the former, and the elder girls feel as interest in drawing and preserving the latter. They have all a taste for drawing, which I trust they will cultivate, as it is a source of amusement and pleasure."[20] While Cotton hedged his daughters' achievements round with the reassuring language of accomplishment, his granddaughter, Ellis Rowan, became a professional artist.[21]

Philip Russell of the Clyde Company family was in no doubt as to the outcome of this coterie female learning in an affectionate memoir of his wife Annie:

> Mrs Reid of Ratho near Boswell, Tasmania, and her widowed daughter Mrs Williams — Both of whom formed a warm attachment for your Mama, which was kept up with uninterrupted love during their lives, Mrs Reid was an exceedingly amiable, domestic, and christian woman, and Mrs Williams, altho full of piety and good works, delights in Travels, literature and poetry. These two dear friends I think had much to do in moulding your Mama's character, and much of their tone of mind was blended in that of hers. Mrs Henry Jennings, then of Launceston, with whom your Mama for a time resided as a pupil under her Governess, Miss Dixon, had also a good influence on her, in not only encouraging her studies, but impressing upon your Mama the importance of religion.[22]

Is this how women experienced their intellectual and emotional relationships with other women?

Using women's diaries and correspondence, historians like Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, Carl Degler, Nancy Cott, and Martha Vicinus have examined the deep and long-lasting relationships between women which nurtured and reproduced a female culture within the dominant culture of their times.[23] To this we might add the coterie female

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in Australian archives and museums is a major untapped source on the hidden participation of women in science in the nineteenth century; see also Kohlstedt, "Historical Records in Australian Museums of Natural History," *Historical Bibliography* 10 (September 1984): 61-82.

19. Alexander Hasluck, *Portrait With Background* (Melbourne, 1976), Chaps. 9-10.
20. George Mackaness, *The Correspondence of John Cotton*, Vol. 2, Australian Historical Monographs (Dubbo, 1978), 26; *ADB*, 1: 249-50.
21. H.J. Samuel, *Wild Flower Hunter: The Story of Ellis Rowan* (London, 1961); Margaret Hazzard, *Flower Paintings of Ellis Rowan* (Canberra, 1982).
22. Brown, *CCP*, 7: 342-46.
23. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations Between Women

learning which was the genesis of the ladies' academy. These secular communities afforded to some women the space and the income to remain, like their sisters in the religious orders, outside the common estate of women. Women's efforts to obtain education against the odds were evidence of an urge to pursue excellence in the traditional accomplishment skills, to strengthen religious faith by study, and to understand the intellectual and cultural movements of their day.

Although it is inevitably a painstaking task, data on the accomplishments tradition and its institutional settings could be assembled for nineteenth-century Britain, America, Canada, South Africa, and New Zealand. In colonial Melbourne over seven hundred women advertised their schools in the daily press between 1840 and 1870, and that number could be increased by reference to suburban and provincial newspapers and directories.[24] Thousands of women made a living by teaching in this tradition, including many early women graduates, in the ladies' academies or as governesses in private homes. In Australia, music governesses sometimes travelled hundreds of miles on horseback to the homes of isolated families on the land.[25] In Edinburgh, London, Dublin, New York, Toronto, and Melbourne the men who inhabited the demi-monde of artists and musicians supplemented their uncertain incomes by teaching women as private pupils or as visiting masters in the ladies' academies, although this is never mentioned by their biographers. To this must be added the whole enterprise of the Catholic convents, for the accomplishments curriculum was common to both Catholic and Protestant traditions, a point which has been overlooked by historians on both sides of the religious divide. After a decade of revisionist research on this form of education for middle-class women in Australia, it could fairly be claimed that the accomplishments genre developed sooner and was more coherent, more widespread, and more profitable than post-elementary education for middle-class men. The rise of this gender-differentiated form of the humanities at the beginning of the nineteenth century is one of the most far-reaching and most neglected phenomena in the history of Western education.

Yet there is a persistent orthodoxy in the historiography of women's education which still enshrines a "watershed thesis" as its explanatory paradigm. In this view, most educational provision for middle-class women before the 1860s was meretricious and misguided. Parents cared little about the education of their daughters, lavishing funds instead upon the education of their sons. The governess in the private home, the lady-principal in her female academy, and the ubiquitous music master peopled a nether world of education, costly and pretentious, ephemeral and haphazard, teaching a smattering of accomplishments to groom middle-class daughters for the marriage market. Girls are deemed to have been educated by default or not at all. In this view of women's education, the early convent schools, like the Mercy Sisters' Academy of Mary Immaculate, established in Melbourne in 1857, are also diminished in importance.

in Nineteenth-Century America," *Signs* 1: 1 (1975); Carl N. Degler, *At Odds: Women and the Family in America From the Revolution to the Present* (New York, 1981); Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Women's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven, 1977); Martha Vicinus, *Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women 1850-1920* (London, 1985).

24. Theobald, "Women and Schools," passim.
25. Marjorie R. Theobald, *Ruyton Remembers 1878-1978* (Melbourne, 1978), 105.

This orthodoxy insists that in the 1850s in Britain, and slightly later in Australia, female education was set on a course towards equality with men. Thus most historians of education, feminist or otherwise, conflate the process of reform with the process of masculinisation. This enables them to identify the hallmarks of reform as the appearance of classics and mathematics in the female curriculum (science teaching was negligible for boys in the 1870s), the admission of women to public examinations (the Oxford and Cambridge locals in England; the university matriculation examinations in Australia), the appearance of a new type of "masculine" public high school for girls (Dorothea Beale's Cheltenham Ladies' College and Frances Buss's North London Collegiate School in England; Presbyterian Ladies' College in Australia; the Otago Girls' High School in New Zealand), and the admission of women to the universities (often through the creation of women's colleges) and, in due course, to the professions.[26]

To be fair, this watershed thesis of female education has been considerably reworked in recent years, with scholars from Britain, North America, and Australia marking out the terrain in at least three new directions. First, they have moved beyond the immediate context of the nineteenth-century English feminist movement, its campaigns and personalities, to the wider context in which feminists made their demands. Within this general framework, for example, Joyce Senders Pedersen argues that the new educational institutions for women should be seen against a background of general social and institutional change. She points to the slow growth of urban industrial culture "in which bureaucratic types of organisation were evident in many types of institutions."[27] As England's industrial wealth grew, the newly prosperous middle classes threw up new social groups who sought élite status through meritocratic achievement, intellectual accomplishment, and institutional affiliation. She warns, however, that the promoters of schools on this model for their daughters wanted to redefine femininity, rather than to challenge the patriarchal basis of Victorian society.

Second, revisionist historians have gone beyond the declared aims and objectives of the new female institutions, utilising the sociologists' notion of the hidden curriculum to explore why apparently radical innovations had conservative outcomes. Here Sara Delamont's notion of "double conformity" is important. Delamont is concerned to understand how girls' schools which had espoused intellectual equality with men continued to reproduce traditional gender characteristics and relationships. She coined the term double conformity to describe the process of strict adherence on the part of both educators and educated to two sets of rigid standards: "those of ladylike behaviour at all times *and* those of the dominant male cultural and educational systems."[28]

Third, revisionist historians have documented and begun to account for a backlash against equality of education for middle-class women at the turn of the century, when

26. For an overview of these events in England, see Margaret Bryant, *The Unexpected Revolution: A Study in the History of the Education of Women and Girls in the Nineteenth Century* (London, 1978); for Australia, see Fitzpatrick, Chap. 2.
27. Joyce Senders Pedersen, "Schoolmistresses and Headmistresses: Elites and Education in Nineteenth-Century England," *Journal of British Studies* 15 (1975): 136-62.
28. Sara Delamont, "Contradictions in Ladies' Education," in *The Nineteenth-Century Woman: Her Cultural and Physical World*, eds. Sara Delamont and Lorna Duffin (London, 1978), 134-63.

oppositional rhetoric turned decisively from questioning whether women *could* succeed at masculine education (a position undermined by their manifest success in these studies) to whether women *should* succeed in the male domain. The literature here is particularly rich, and Carol Dyhouse's work on social Darwinism, the role of women, and the cult of domestic education is a distinguished example.[29] In the Australian literature, Alison Mackinnon's excellent study of the Advanced School for Girls, Adelaide, is written within this revisionist framework.[30] Thus while the modern feminist movement and its historians have implicitly called into question nineteenth-century reforms in the education of middle-class women, they have not seriously questioned the terrain on which the debate should take place.

So now that we have found her, what are we to make of this woman at the piano? She at once forces upon us a stern encounter with that sacred cow of feminist theory, the culture/male, nature/female dichotomy.[31] The accomplished woman belongs unequivocally to the realm of culture, a nineteenth-century reincarnation of woman as the ancient civiliser of man. In the words of Sylvana Tomaselli, "the view that woman civilises, that she cultivates, refines, perhaps even adulterates and corrupts, is as recurrent as the view that she is nature's most dutiful and untouched daughter, or to put it less palatably, a being closer to animals, one link, at least, lower than man in the Great Chain of Beings."[32]

Yet if the woman at the piano signals a link between culture and womanliness in the nineteenth century, she also signals an anomaly. Why should the accomplishments curriculum emerge in the education of middle-class daughters at precisely the time when the notion of separate spheres for men and women would seem to privilege the womanly culture of housewifery?

Subliminal understandings of nineteenth-century woman's relationship to culture should not be separated from a more general evolution in Western consciousness which threw up the idea of culture and, indeed, the word itself in its modern usage, as a response to the industrial civilisation which was emerging. Raymond Williams, for example, traces from Coleridge to Ruskin the construction of culture in terms of the arts, and the association of the general perfection of humanity with the practice and study of the arts. According to Williams, the arts came to constitute "the opposition on general human grounds to the kind of civilisation that was being inaugurated."[33] It was only in the nineteenth century, he argues, that artists and intellectuals came to symbolise the "practical separation of certain moral and intellectual activities from the driven impetus of a new kind of society."

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29. Carol Dyhouse, *Girls Growing Up in Late Victorian and Edwardian England* (London, 1981).
30. Alison Mackinnon, *One Foot on the Ladder: Origins and Outcomes of Girls' Secondary Education in South Australia* (Brisbane, 1984).
31. Sherry B. Ortner, "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?" in *Woman, Culture and Society*, eds. Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere (Palo Alto, 1974), 67-88.
32. Sylvana Tomaselli, "The Enlightenment Debate on Women," *History Workshop: A Journal of Socialist and Feminist Historians* 20 (Autumn 1985): 101-24.
33. Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society 1780-1950* (Harmondsworth, 1982), Chaps. 3-4.

The rise of the accomplishments curriculum in the education of middle-class women in the same period is not coincidental. Williams does not consider the possibility of nineteenth-century woman as cultural critic, and with good reason, but his analysis of culture as a "saving clause in a bad treaty" resonates with the idealisation of women as another saving clause in the same bad treaty. Notionally, women became the guardians of the British moral conscience. There are also striking similarities in the delineation of the female mind and that of the romantic, creative genius of the period. The intuitive and imaginative mode of thought, and the validity of personal feeling and private experience in the revelation of truth, were attributed to women as well as to the creative genius and, indeed, characterised both the Romantic and Evangelical movements. Yet woman's potential as cultural critic was mutated into a potential for moral influence; the woman at the piano was rendered as an artefact of culture, not an agent of culture and, as such, a passive civilising influence within the private sphere of home and family. This is an important point missed by historians who deal only with the later period, when a further shift in educational fashion had thrown up the term "mere accomplishments."[34]

As this analysis implies, the repositioning of woman within the nature/culture debate does not necessarily rearrange the relationship between knowledge, power, and female subjectivity. It is fundamental to an understanding of nineteenth-century female education that it attempted a historic uncoupling of the nexus between power and knowledge, and between learner and subjectivity. The nineteenth-century conceptualisation of the educated woman as the woman at the piano signals to the historian an obsession with the aesthetics of female intellectual activity, with the exterior stamp of education upon the female body. The injunction that education should adorn the female body ran like a litany through sermons, prescriptive literature, and cartoons alike. In Elizabeth Grosz's terms, the female body is "a political object *par excellence*: its forms, capacities, behaviour, gestures, movements ... primary objects of political contestation."[35]

The struggle over female intellectual subjectivity had colonised sites outside the terrain of ideology. Nineteenth-century polemicists, educators, and parents understood that the externals of learning, its geography, architecture, and rituals, could be gender specific in ways which we are only just beginning to understand. Propriety demanded that the setting for women's learning be the middle-class family household. The women-as-learner was surrounded by the cultural symbols of reproduction: the authority of the father, who often supervised his daughters' studies; the close moral and physical guardianship by the mother, who devoted herself to the maintenance of the private sphere; the brothers who went daily unchaperoned into the world. Nineteenth-century autobiographies tell us about the web of ritual and taboo which governed women's learning within the home: in which rooms?; in who's company?; in what manner of dress?; at what time of day?; after which household duties had been performed?; after which calls

34. The term was used by Charles Pearson, founding headmaster of Presbyterian Ladies' College, in his opening address in 1875 which was reprinted as *The Higher Culture of Women* (Melbourne, 1875).

35. Elizabeth Grosz, "Notes Towards a Corporeal Feminism," *Australian Feminist Studies* 5 (1987): 3.

had been paid and received?; what should be learned?; in what manner it should be deployed?

The ladies' academy was obliged to take as its institutional and psychological paradigm the mother and her daughters in the private sphere. The lady-principal stood at the centre of an intricate cultural system. She was an anomalous figure, enjoying a special dispensation of gentility in a society which frowned on women in paid employment, yet insisted that women must be the educators of women. Her school was also her home, and within the familial boundaries of space and authority she personified the proprieties of gender – the accomplished woman presiding over the private sphere. Her professional self was decently veiled by this institutional mode of the school-as-family and by her obedience to the cyclical happenings of womanhood. Unlike the new "professional" spinster headmistress who succeeded her, she was lady, educator, mother, daughter, sister, wife, or widow, achieving propriety as an integral part of the middle-class landscape. She stood as a symbol of moral certainty in the patriarchal social order, a reassuring intermediary in the encounter between knowledge and the female mind.

The shaping of female subjectivity demanded also a congruence between ideology and architecture. The nineteenth-century Australian ladies' academy combined school and home under the same roof. The intimacies of married life (or the respectable facade after the intimacies had ceased), the birth and death of children and their care and education, the onerous care of ageing parents, younger brothers and sisters, in-laws, nieces, and nephews, took place within the walls of the school. While the institution of the female school-as-family has often been explained in terms of expediency, the "poor widow" turning her last asset to account, successful lady-principals and those with capital to invest leased or purchased the most prestigious private homes available, and made the fact known in their advertisements.[36]

The middle-class female school eschewed not only the masculine impulse towards corporate existence (and its concomitant architectural expression) but the notion of a school itself. The proprietor solicited her clients in the language of a social peer opening her home to the daughters of her friends, rather than of one engaged in gainful employment. At the beginning of each term she was "at home" to her young friends. Prospectuses and newspaper advertisements displayed considerable ingenuity in reconciling the sanctity of the private sphere with professional activity and the intent to turn a handsome profit:

> A lady, who received a highly-finished English and Continental education, accustomed to tuition, will receive a limited number of young ladies as Resident Pupils. She will be assisted by her only daughter, who is a superior musician and thoroughly educated, a German governess, and visiting masters. The education is strictly private, the terms moderate. The residence, having shower and plunge bath, is surrounded by a garden, and pleasantly situated.[37]

Where the success of the enterprise was such that the existence of a school could not be disguised, the proprietor continued to offer the sanctuary of her home and the close

36. Theobald, "Women and Schools," Chap. 3.

37. *Argus*, 14 January 1864.

moral guardianship and maternal care which that implied. Madame Julie Vieusseux, whom we have already met in her capacity as teacher of drawing, advertised in her 1862 *Prospectus* that: "The Domestic Arrangements are those of a well regulated family, Mrs. Vieusseux associating with her young friends, and paying utmost attention to their well-being, dress, manners, and habits."[38] In the following year she had 103 girls enrolled.

The struggle over female subjectivity and its relationship to knowledge threw up two powerful stereotypes in the nineteenth century. The term "blue-stocking" was coined in the eighteenth century to encompass an informal sisterhood of intellectual women which included Elizabeth Montagu, Elizabeth Carter, and the youthful Hannah More, who recanted after her evangelical conversion in later life. The word hardened into a term of mocking abuse in the nineteenth century, as female learning spread beyond a small group of "exceptional" women. It implied powerful psychological sanctions against the wrong use of woman's intellect in a patriarchal society. The ridiculous figure of the blue-stocking was pressed into service as a shared understanding that forms of knowledge and the manner of their acquisition are gender specific and intimately connected to the attainment of gendered moral propriety. The stereotype of the blue-stocking comes to life most vividly in nineteenth-century cartoons which typically depicted the learned woman as plain, boyish in physique (angular, flat-chested, and hirsute), and poorly groomed. If the blue-stocking were married, she assumed the proportions of a Valkyrie, her unkempt and undernourished children clinging to a small, ineffectual husband. In Foucault's frame of reference, this inscription of the external surface of the female body was, in the negative sense, directed towards the acquisition of appropriate cultural attitudes, beliefs, and values – in short, of an appropriate female subjectivity. The blue-stocking was the woman who appropriates masculine knowledge in pursuit of self-esteem, intellectual authority, and hence the potential for economic autonomy and competence in the public sphere. She appropriated knowledge in a manner which went beyond the proper bounds of woman's sphere and offended the canons of patriarchal society.

While the blue-stocking represented the unacceptable outcome of female learning, the accomplished woman personified its desired outcome. She was seldom the subject of cartoons, although she was popular with didactic novelists throughout the nineteenth century. In contrast to the blue-stocking, the accomplished woman's learning was deployed discreetly in the private sphere, enhancing her womanly moral excellence and serving others. Female "accomplishment" signified more than an area of study, a method of study, an attitude to study, or a standard of achievement, although it owed something to each. It signalled the appropriate use of woman's intellect in man's society. The accomplished woman did not appropriate knowledge in order to enhance self-esteem, moral authority, or economic independence. Knowledge-as-accomplishment did not confer autonomy and hence did not affront patriarchal notions of woman's place in the scheme of things. The Australian singer, Dame Nellie Melba (1861–1931), who became the greatest operatic soprano of her time, a confidante of kings and queens, and a very

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38. Vieusseux Ladies' College *Prospectus*, 1862.

wealthy woman, understood perfectly the subjective difference between accomplishment and professionalism:

> The girl or youth — but more especially the girl — whose accomplishments expand to their utmost attractiveness under the genial influence of the home circle, is too often the one who is least fitted for the struggles, the labours, the sacrifices of a professional career, especially when entered on in a foreign land. The very qualities which are her strength in the world of her sympathetic friends become her weakness in the too often blighting atmosphere of cold, or designing, or indifferent strangers.[39]

It is over two hundred years since Mary Wollstonecraft delivered her perspicacious judgement on the notion of female accomplishment as "the received wisdom of female excellence separated by specious reasoners from human excellence."[40] With the benefit of hindsight we are in a position to note that, with the rise of the accomplishments curriculum in the nineteenth century, we are witnessing the translation into mass educational practice of the enduring and oppressive myth that there is a natural affinity between the humanities and the female mind — with its equally enduring and oppressive implication that there is a natural affinity between science and the male mind. The myth of intuitive woman was not new even then, but why the crescendo of voices proclaiming, with Bishop Charles Perry of Melbourne, that for "critical scholarship, philosophical speculations... the higher branches of pure or mixed mathematics, or political or professional science,... women in general possess neither the natural inclination or the capacity"?[41]

Patriarchal social formations have proved remarkably resilient in periods of rapid economic and social change such as that set in motion by the rise of industrial capitalism. In the nineteenth century men's knowledge was undergoing a historic swing from the closed, largely symbolic knowledge/power systems of the classics, theology, and the liberal arts, to the open, utilitarian knowledge/power systems of science and technology, based on the understanding and exploitation of the physical world. The rational, scientific frame of mind of necessity underpinned the activities of capitalist man in the industrial and agrarian exploitation of the natural world. The middle-class beneficiaries of this capitalist enterprise challenged aristocratic power on grounds of moral superiority; they felt an urgent need to educate their daughters, but for life within the private sphere. The scientific frame of mind and the new knowledge about the physical world must belong to men, and ancient taboos on women's learning had to be reworked. The icon of the woman at the piano was enthroned many decades before the scientific frame of mind had a serious impact upon the institutional education of elite Western men. The swelling discourse in the Edwardian era on the efficacy of "domestic science" for women was certainly connected to contemporary campaigns to force upon Australian universities and secondary schools a serious commitment to science, and feminist historians have rightly exposed this pseudo-science as an assault upon the intellectual subjectivity of women. Yet they have so far failed to note that women's exclusion from the great intellectual adventure of the twentieth century was already a *fait accompli*.

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39. John Hetherington, *Melba* (London, 1973), 37.
40. Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792; New York, 1967), 68.
41. *Argus*, 21 June 1872.

So what is the sin of Laura? Laura sinned, in the drawing-room of nineteenth-century Presbyterian Ladies' College, by transcending her womanly role as artefact of culture and claiming the masculine prerogative as shaper of culture. That the incident is set in Australia's first "masculine" high school for girls, and not in a ladies' academy, should give us pause for thought. The author of *The Getting of Wisdom*, Henry Handel Richardson, was Ethel Richardson (1870–1946), who attended Presbyterian Ladies' College in the 1880s. The novel is, therefore, to an extent which is debated at length by scholars of both literature and history, autobiographical. Of one thing we can be sure; Ethel Richardson was indeed the woman at the piano. While at the school she won a music scholarship to the Royal Conservatorium in Leibzig, Germany. In Leibzig she met her future husband, John Robertson, later a distinguished professor of literature at the University of London. She turned from music to writing and established an international career as a novelist.[42] It is this possibility of subversion which is the well-spring of feminist history.

42. Dorothy Green, *Henry Handel Richardson and Her Fiction* (Sydney, 1986); Fitzpatrick, passim; Leonie Kramer, *Myself When Laura: Fact and Fiction in Henry Handel Richardson's School Career* (Melbourne, 1966); Henry Handel Richardson, *Myself When Young* (Melbourne, 1948).