

“Most Women have no Characters at all’: Control through Conduct Literature”

Abstract:

The long eighteenth century saw the rise of conduct books as a literary sub-genre comprising of advice columns, letters, and edification materials predominantly authored by men with the aim to inculcate ‘passive virtues’ in women, and to dictate, construct, and control acceptable notions of femininity. The paper aims to examine two works side by side: John Gregory’s “A Father’s Legacy to his Daughters” (1774), a piece typical of conduct literature that sought to dispossess women of their agency, and “Vindication of the Rights of Woman” (1792), an essay written by Mary Wollstonecraft who retaliated to Gregory’s book with her oppositional feminist critique. John Gregory’s seminal work follows the generalizing tradition of guiding women on how to make themselves objects of male desire, with marriage as their chief goal. Whereas Mary Wollstonecraft in her essay stresses that women should refrain from ‘over-exercised sensibility’ and re-possess their identities; to not ‘have power over men, but over themselves.’ The comparative analysis will examine the pro and anti-feminist arguments in both works, contextualized with other contemporary male-authored conduct literatures and female counter-narratives.

Key words: Agency, conduct books, female education, feminist counter-narratives, repossession

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Biographical note:

I am a Masters student of English literature. My current research interest is in ecofeminist theory and its application in comparative literature(s). My most recent paper examined subversion of colonial narratives in Rumer Godden’s “Black Narcissus” (1939), depicting resistance conveyed through female and colonial spaces.