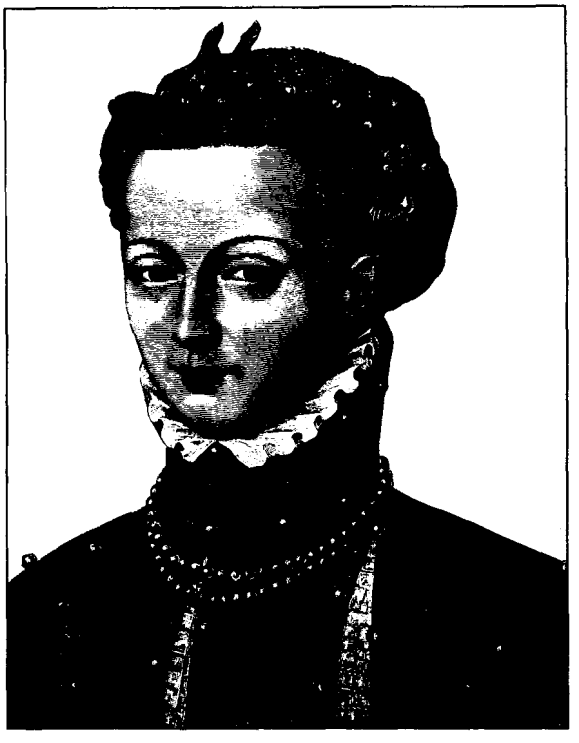
Female Education in 16th & 17th Century England

Influences, Attitudes, and Trends



For about a thousand years in England, from the start of Christianity there in the late 6th century through the 15th century, at least some members of all classes of society were taught to read. While in those years literacy was the prime tool for religious and learned scholarship, literacy was also a very pragmatic instrument for personal communication and for the other written necessities of economic and social functioning, including household and estate record-keeping (Clanchy, p. 198). In the many years that women were empowered with household and ecclesiastical responsibilities — which included much of the Middle Ages — reading and writing, on some level, was needed by them as well as by men.

In fact, it appears that in England, prior to the 16th century, the family and community structures of the localized preindustrial society of those many years allowed for a wide range of activities in which women could quite easily participate, though to a lesser extent than men. For poorer women, that participation included both learning and teaching to read at the early levels when males of similar station did. For high-born and for convent-situated women, a certain amount of advanced religious and advanced secular learning was also available.

The picture was changed by events of the 16th century, a century that, in England, started with the era of humanism — roughly, the forty years between 1500 and 1540 — was followed

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in mid-century by the twenty years of the Protestant Revolt or Reformation, and ended with forty years of the reign of Elizabeth I. All three periods affected the subsequent course of female education.

Sixteenth Century Humanism in England

In contrast to the purely religious scholasticism that preceded them, the humanists advocated a liberalizing of thought and attitude, as well as an emphasis on classical Greek and Latin scholarship. Most pertinent for our discussion was the humanists' urging that the Scriptures be read in the vernacular rather than solely in Latin, and their strong recommendation that women be given advanced education. Such humanists as Leonardo Bruni of Italy (c. 1370-1444) and Juan Luis Vives (1492-1540) of Spain were especially clear in their advocacy of women's learning.

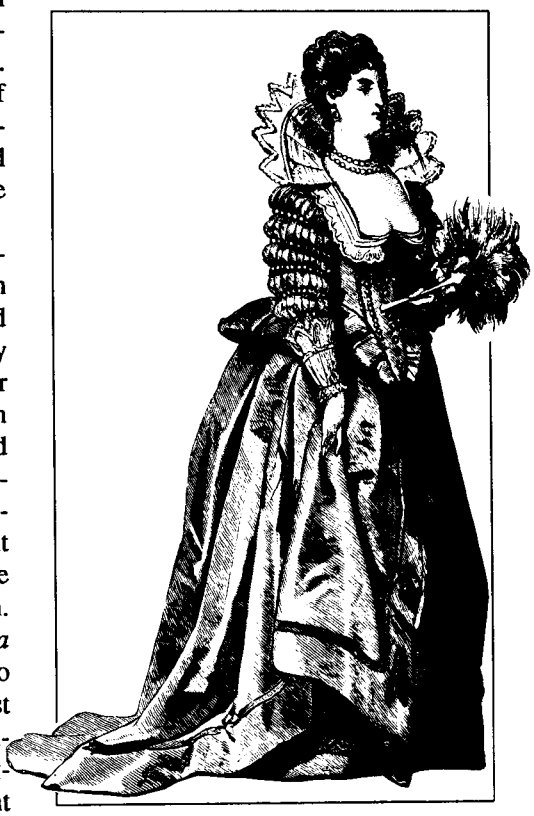
In England, among the most prominent proponents of humanism in the early 16th century was Sir Thomas More, the man for all seasons (1478-1535), closely allied with Desiderius Erasmus of Holland (1467-1536), and Sir Thomas Elyot (1490-1546). More is held responsible for a decided advance in the 16th century in the education of upperclass English women — in such subjects as classical literature, philosophy, mathematics, astronomy, physics, logic, and rhetoric. More himself educated a number of young women, including his three daughters, in his own home, and their classical education was a model for other noble families of the time.

Adding to the effects of More's leadership was the fact that Catherine of Aragon (1485-1536), daughter of Isabella and Ferdinand of Spain and first wife of Henry VIII of England, was very much in favour of humanism and had close contact with outstanding humanists. She inspired Erasmus to write his *On Christian Matrimony*, one of the works strongly supportive of education for women, and brought Vives to the English court to be in charge of her daughter Mary Tudor's education. Vives' treatise, *The Instruction of a Christian Woman* (1523), dedicated to Catherine, was perhaps the foremost work on women's education in 16th century Europe, with great influence in England (Stock, p. 51). Another eminent humanist, Roger Ascham (1515-1568) was tutor to Princess Elizabeth and then Latin secretary to her cousin, Mary of Scotland.

Thus, by the year 1540, the idea of a broad classical education, moving beyond the religious focus of the past, had become accepted for the upperclass women, and through most of the century many such women did indeed become learned. By 1540, however, a new major force entered the picture — the Protestant Reformation — and set the stage for subsequent changes in the education of women.

The Protestant Reformation

The Protestant Reformation may be traced to the year 1517, when Martin Luther cast off the authority of Rome and inspired the establishment of a host of Protestant denominations and sects. The new Protestant groups had doctrines that differed from each other in many respects, but all shared the ideals of using the everyday vernacular language instead of Latin in the religious services and of calling upon all members to study the Scriptures in that vernacular. This meant that direct contact with the Scriptures was not to be limited to the clergy and to upperclass scholars who could read and understand Latin, but was to be available to anyone who mastered the rudiments of reading.



The Protestant groups and their leaders varied, however, on the question of women's education. John Knox (?1505-1572), for example, the founder of Scottish Presbyterianism, took a vehemently anti-female stance in his treatise, *The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women* (?1558). Yet, Luther himself was very supportive of women's education, insisting on compulsory schooling for all boys and all girls on primary and secondary levels, and advanced education for qualified girls as well as boys. Luther also noted the need for female teachers (Green, p. 97). Those ideals regarding women's education took hold in the Germanic regions of continental Europe to an extraordinary degree with the establishment of many schools that girls attended and a solid acceptance of female education.

In England, Protestantism started in 1534, when Henry VIII established the Church of England after Pope Clement VII excommunicated him for marrying Anne Boleyn without receiving a papal divorce from Catherine of Aragon. Henry declared himself the head of the new church, and dissolved the convents and monasteries, and confiscated for the king and state all of the former church's properties. As a result, the convent and other church and monastic schools were closed and most of them never reopened.

To take their place, a great number of privately endowed schools arose throughout England, well-subsidized by the members of newly-rich mercantile classes. The new schools were staffed by a class of scholarly schoolmasters, generally male, many of whom replaced less well-educated local clergy and other teachers left over from the generation before.

The Elizabethan Influence

Henry VIII was succeeded by his daughter, Elizabeth I (1533-1603), whose learning both reflected and fostered the scholarly values of the humanists as well as of the early Protestant reformers. By the latter part of the 16th century, the impacts of humanism, Protestantism, and Elizabeth's reign had coalesced. The view of the time on women's

education includes those expressed by Richard Mulcaster.

Mulcaster (c. 1532-1611) was perhaps the most influential of a group of schoolmasters/spelling reformers of the Elizabethan era, and he had an immeasurable effect on reading and spelling in England and America (Balmuth, p. 126). On the question of female education, Mulcaster's position was consonant with the climate of the late 16th century, although he went somewhat further than his contemporaries in advocating formal education for more than just upperclass women.

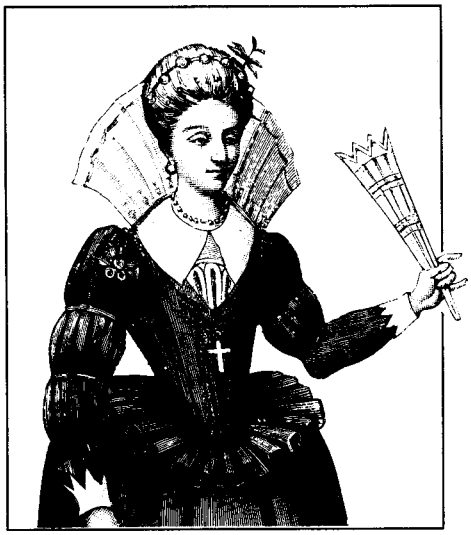
In a chapter entitled "Education of Girls" in his book *Positions* (1581), Mulcaster makes this case for educating girls: "Our country doth allow it; our duty doth enforce it; their aptness calls for it; their excellency commands it" (DeMolen, pp. 125-126). Yet, though he obviously felt that women were capable of acquiring learning, Mulcaster also cautioned that a woman's being learned could not override the practical effects of her being of a low social status; for example, there was little chance of her marrying upward (DeMolen, pp. 140-141).

The fact that Mulcaster's monarch, Elizabeth was a learned woman, assuredly helped the cause of advanced education for women, as reflected in this statement by Mulcaster:

> *That young* maidens *can learn, nature doth give them, and that they have learned our experience doth teach us;...what foreign example can more assure the world than our diamond at home;...if no example did confirm it that young* maidens *deserve the training, this is our own mirror, the majesty of her sex, doth prove it in her own person, and commends it to our reason. We have besides her highness, as undershining stars, many singular ladies and gentlewomen* (DeMolen, p. 133).

The Influence of Puritanism

The newer teachers and members of the new education-supporting classes mentioned above often were Puritans, opposed to the Church of England. Many of them, too, were followers of John Knox, whose antagonism to women's education has been noted earlier. One effect of having so much of the grass roots schooling of the latter half of the 16th century in Puritan hands was the dissemination of Puritan values which, ultimately led to a new family structure. In the new structure, the wife was a help mate to her husband, with circumscribed duties. This prescriptive family, headed by an authoritarian husband/father, served a religious need: the Catholic practice of group worship centered in the church was replaced by the ideal of each family household becoming a center for worship, with daily services, Scripture reading, and other practices that depended upon a clearly defined family model with responsibility for education as well as religion. In the realization of the model, the aspirations of the initial humanists and Protestant reformers regarding women's education were changed and in the changing, became intellectually lower with the effects felt in the 17th century. In contrast not only to the stated liberalism of the previous century but to the practices of many of the years prior to the 17th century, more and more limitations were placed on all women. The Elizabethan ideal of a rich classical education for upperclass women was supplanted by one that addressed a broader population of women, but called for much less erudition. That is, a new ideal arose of women of all classes becoming literate enough to read the Bible for themselves and perhaps to teach it to the children and servants of the household — but not much more. For high-born women, the prevailing ideal was more secular, and included the graces required of a socially accomplished wife — the Cavalier values of the 17th century left their mark in this respect.



In practice, the formal schooling actually available to females barely reflected even those limited ideals. For women who were too poor to hope to preside over a domestic domain, there was practically no provision. For the middle classes, though there is little data on the precise extent of primary school education for girls, the picture that emerges is one of very limited resources. On the secondary level, girls were rarely permitted into the grammar schools, nor were they sent as often as boys even when they might have been welcome. Thus, even the Quakers, who believed in female education, only provided two female and two co-educational boarding schools out of a total of fifteen that they had established by 1671 (Stock, p. 70). There were some female boarding schools for a limited number of the well-to-do, but their curricula, with rare exceptions, were aimed at developing socially acceptable rather than learned women. For women's higher education, the possibilities were even more closed off. Dissolving the convents had eliminated those institutions as sites for any kind of women's scholarly advancement; nor were women permitted into the secular centers of higher learning — the universities.

How women reacted to such limitation of opportunity is a natural question. The answer for the 17th century is equivocal: on the one hand, women in general believed that a woman's social life, as well as her morality, could be endangered by too much learning. Yet, there are indications that such caution did not mean that women considered themselves innately inferior. In Elizabeth Jocelyn's treatise, *The Mothers Legacie, to her unborne Childe* (1624), she hints at an inner pride covered over with self-protective diffidence:

> *I desire (if the child be a daughter) her bringing up may be learning the Bible, as my sisters do, good housewifery, writing and good works: other learning a woman needs not: though I admire it in those whom God hath blest with discretion...But where learning and wisdom meet in a virtuous disposed woman, she is the fittest closet for all goodness. She is like a well-balanced ship that may bear all her sail. She is— indeed, I should but shame myself, if I should go about to praise her more.* (Watson, 1906, p. 118).

The picture, then, that emerges of female education in 17th century England is, on the whole, rather dismal. Nevertheless, that century also helped set the stage for the education of succeeding years. Although it is beyond the province of this paper to detail the ways that the 17th century had impact on later years, it may be said that, from the very start of the 18th century, certain aspects of the educational picture began to brighten for women, helping to set into motion a series of processes that resulted ultimately, though laboriously, in the much more cheerful image presented by the English female education of today.

SEVENTEENTH CENTURY WOMEN IN GENERAL BELIEVED THAT A WOMAN'S SOCIAL LIFE, AS WELL AS HER MORALITY, COULD BE ENDANGERED BY TOO MUCH LEARNING.

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