

# TREND & Tradition

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FURTHER READING

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COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG COLLECTIONS

During the course of the 18th century, novels increasingly portrayed women as pious rather than wicked. Such volumes became a crucial component of female education.



*How* NOVELS FILLED

INTELLECTUAL VOIDS *in the* LIVES

*of* COLONIAL WOMEN

*by* CATHERINE KERRISON

# BY THE BOOK

*It WAS one of* THOSE DELIGHTFULLY MILD

DAYS *that* OCCASIONALLY GRACE *the* VIRGINIA

TIDEWATER *in* WINTER. THE CLEAR WEATHER

*on that* DECEMBER DAY *in* 1711 BECKONED *to*

two women, who left the house together for a walk.

Mrs. Dunn had been staying with her friend Lucy Byrd on and off for more than a year, seeking refuge from an abusive husband. They lost track of the time and were so completely engrossed in their conversation that Lucy Byrd forgot to give her slaves instructions about preparations for dinner. Returning to the house, they found William Byrd II hungry and incensed.

Later that evening, he punished his wife, refusing her request to take a book out of his library.

Fast-forward more than 100 years to 1819. Petersburg, Va., bookseller Joseph Swan was filling the order of Lady Jean Skipwith, one of the wealthiest women in Virginia. “Your Lady Ship will Observe that I have procured all the Books (According to your Order) that is to be found in this town,” he said in the note that accompanied her shipment. He would write to New York to supply the deficiencies and assured her, “Any Books that you want, order them[;] if not to be had I shall write for them.”

These vignettes bracket a century of momentous

change. Exemplifying the privileges of the old order, William Byrd’s splendid walnut-encased library — which contained some 3,600 books — was a powerful symbol of his authority to govern everyone in his household, *particularly* his wife. Lucy Byrd refused to accept the prescribed modes of female behavior and wanted to expand her provincial education through her husband’s books. William was just as determined to keep her intellectual curiosity tightly tethered.

By Jean Skipwith’s time, however, Southern women’s access to books had broadened considerably. They read religious tracts, conduct-of-life advice and even novels. These books, both religious and secular, offered lessons about female virtue that would inspire women to pick up their own pens to compose advice for the next generation. Relying on the authority of their own experience and new understandings about female virtue, women’s writings would look very different from those of male authors on whose instructions they had been raised.

Female literacy in the South had been abysmal for most of the Colonial period. Measured in terms

**Eighteenth-century mothers sometimes wrote journals that were meant to be moral guides for their daughters.**

to the serpent's temptation as dragging Adam down with her. This lesson was communicated in various ways, from the overtly religious *The Whole Duty of Man* (1658) and *The Ladies Calling* (1677) by the English minister Richard Allestree to the secular and genteel James Fordyce's *Sermons* (1765), so gleefully pilloried decades later by Jane Austen. But regardless of the style of delivery, the point remained consistent that women should properly and unquestioningly submit themselves to the government of men.

The spread of evangelical Christianity altered that message somewhat. Introduced to Colonial Americans in the decades just before the Revolution, evangelicalism dis-

pensed with dogma, emphasizing instead a person's individual relationship with God. For evangelicals, the evidence of true conversion lay in the range of emotions they experienced, from the despair of admitting their guilt to the ecstasy of receiving God's grace and salvation.

This experience authorized converts to preach their story; no learned degree was required. Women particularly embraced this religion of the heart. Consigned to the world of feeling that was understood to be uniquely female, many women found in evangelical Christianity a unique invitation.

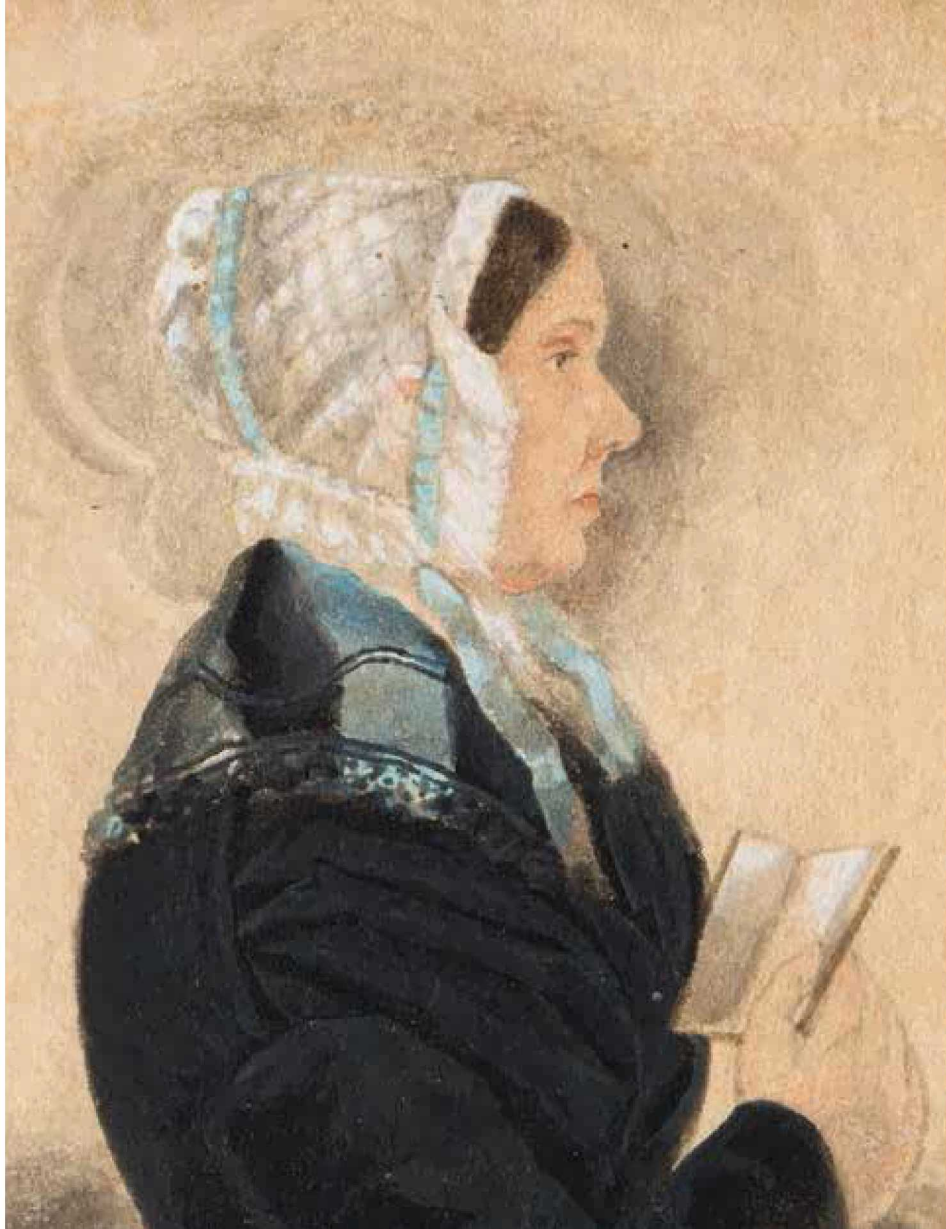
In the raptures of conversion, women realized a dawning sense of their spiritual autonomy. Judith Anna Smith of Henrico County, Va., kept a journal, resolved to record "the goodness of God towards [me]." Only 20, she was troubled as she looked in vain for the sins that would prompt the "broken ▶

of a woman's ability to sign her name, it had always lagged substantially behind men's, although more women could read than write. In a day when reading and writing were not taught in tandem, writing was thought to be necessary for men, who were expected to go into trade and support families. Generally, housewifery skills such as sewing and cooking and the rudimentary ability to read the Bible were considered all that white women needed to know.

Gendering education in this way, and controlling access to knowledge as William Byrd did, reinforced prevailing beliefs that women's subordinate status was instituted by divine and natural law, and that because of their nature, women were best suited to domestic duties.

In their churches and in their reading, women learned that they were daughters of Eve, whose great sin in the Garden of Eden was not so much yielding





The growth of evangelical Christianity opened an intellectual window for women in both reading and writing.

George Washington, whom she considered deists, when they visited her home in Williamsburg. In a reversal of William Byrd's management of Lucy, Catherine Dulany Belt of Maryland recommended devotional books to her dying brother. "I do not feel like a vain woman," she declared, but emboldened by her faith, she could not "forbear to give my opinion."

Like Judith Anna Smith, Elizabeth Foote Washington, the wife of George Washington's distant cousin Lund, also kept a journal to chart the moral course of her life. But she went a step further. She intended her journal to serve as a guide for the child whose birth she was awaiting.

"Whatever Legacy in advice a dead Mother leaves her Daughters, must have great weight [weight] with them," she believed. She hoped her daughter "will read this manuscript more than once, & whatever other manuscript Books I leave behind." In dispensing her own advice, Elizabeth Foote Washington asserted an authority that tradi-

heart and those flowing tears" she knew she was supposed to feel as evidence of her conversion. But she was convinced that the daily discipline of writing would eventually reveal the very essence of her soul.

As the central figure of her story, Smith was, as she wrote, "the clay in the hands of the potter," waiting to be "fashion[ed] after [God's] own gracious image." Her belief that her introspection would reveal her true self as the image of God is remarkable, since like all girls in this period, she would have been taught from childhood that only men mirrored God.

Anglicans were much less given to emotional expressions in religion. Nevertheless, even they were not immune to evangelical influence, especially its insistence on individual spiritual authority. Elizabeth Nicholas Randolph's firm religious convictions reinforced her refusal to receive Thomas Jefferson and

tional prescriptive works never ceded to women.

But female readers had other options besides the dry pedantry of ministers. Over the course of the 18th century, the novel became firmly planted on American soil. Featuring women at the center of dramatic plots that turned on disguise and deceit, seduction and betrayal, rebellion and reconciliation, novels delivered moral lessons in a style unmatched by traditional advice. Their appeal seemed universal. As one writer in *The Virginia Gazette* complained nervously in 1772, "This contagion is the more to be dreaded, as it daily spreads through all ranks of people; and Miss, the Tailor's daughter, talks now as familiarly to her confidante, Miss Polly Staytope, of Swains & sentiments as the accomplished dames of genteel life." Novel reading leveled social barriers as young women of all ranks recognized the dangers of

smooth-talking men to whom the innocent could fall prey.

Novels offered an alternative reading on women's lives to that dished up by traditional didactic literature. For example, while one male-authored advice book had counseled women to overlook the infidelity of their husbands, female-authored novels roundly condemned it.

Similarly, the English periodical *The Female Spectator*, written by Eliza Haywood, was filled with stories that warned women against relying on the honor of men to preserve female virtue. Her stories showed women how to resist the dissembling flattery and empty promises of seducers and to claim responsibility for their own reputations. In their depiction of intelligent women, novels also questioned men's claims to intellectual superiority over them.

Novels, then, became a crucial component of female education. Increasingly portraying women as virtuous and pious rather than seductive and wicked, novels became guides for Southern women. They offered models for behavior and vehicles for conveying lessons to the next generation. Recalling the seduction of a friend by a glamorous French officer during the Revolution, Eliza Ambler Brent Carrington of Yorktown, Va., transformed the story into a novel called *Variety or the vicissitudes of Long*

*life* for the instruction of her nieces. After rereading the letters she had saved from those wartime years, Carrington turned the real-life characters from her girlhood into characters of her novel. Parents, friends, French soldiers, unwary innocents and experienced counselors appeared wearing the most transparent of disguises.

While Carrington learned how not to behave, Caroline Burgwin Clitherall of North Carolina gleaned from her parents' letters helpful lessons about honorable courtship. Her planter father met her English mother in England in 1777, but they were separated by the Revolution until their marriage in 1782. Their faith in God, frequently cited in their correspondence, sustained their love through those trying years. Their example enabled Caroline to resist the British soldier who won her heart during a visit to England. "Love, first love," she wrote in a diary, "never can be driven from a warm and feeling heart."

Obedient to her father, she returned to North Carolina, where she was courted by George Clitherall, who was at first no match for a dashing foreign soldier. It would take ▶



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**OPEN BOOKS**  
 A sample of the novels popular among Southern women in the 18th century

▶ **The Adventures of Gils Blas (1732)**  
*Alain-René Lesage*  
 A rags-to-riches story of a 17-year-old headed for college only to find himself on the wrong side of the law. He becomes a valet who uses his quick wit and adaptability to his advantage. He becomes secretary to the prime minister and eventually retires to a castle to live a comfortable life.

▶ **Pamela (1740)**  
*Samuel Richardson*  
 A 15-year-old servant resists the advances of a wealthy landowner, who imprisons her in his country house but eventually rewards her virtue by proposing marriage.

▶ **Clarissa (The History of a Young Lady) (1748)**  
*Samuel Richardson*  
 Clarissa Harlowe becomes the pawn in her family's game to rise to aristocracy. There are a variety of schemes to betroth her to various suitors, including one who kidnaps her and holds her prisoner in a brothel. Clarissa's family discover too late the misery they have caused her.

▶ **Roderick Random (1748)**  
*Tobias Smollett*  
 Shunned by much of his family, Roderick Random uses his medical skills to win a few friends. He sometimes poses as a nobleman to attract wealthy women, but the book ends happily when he is reunited in Argentina with his father and marries the woman of his choice.

▶ **Peregrine Pickle (1751)**  
*Tobias Smollett*  
 Egotistical Peregrine Pickle moves from adventure to adventure that includes everything from an Oxford education to bankruptcy and jail to redemption and marriage. The book offers a caustic portrayal of 18th-century European society.

▶ **Tristram Shandy (1760)**  
*Laurence Sterne*  
 This family saga makes fun of nearly everything, but some readers complained that the book was too bawdy, irreverent and obscene. The work is more famous for its style in which the narrator engages in free association and digressions about family history.



In novels, women found profoundly different advice, often depending on whether the author was a man or a woman.

drive the main characters, Caroline's hero depended on the exposure of truth. To clear himself, Clitherall invited Caroline's father to write to all who knew him for character references, making an open book of his life.

Such standards of virtue were strikingly different from the secret alliances and messages, forbidden meetings and shadowy pasts on which most novel plots depended. Although Caroline's parents' letters guided her choices, they did not counteract entirely the influence of novels that made her yearn for the passion of a foregone love. As she reworked her own quiet courtship into the stuff of novels, she incorporated her decision to place duty and reason over passion when she left her British soldier behind. Her autobiography told a story even more dramatic, in which honor and virtue combined to yield a happy ending.

a scene of high drama, worthy of a novel, to finally engage her heart. "Where is [Clitherall]?" Burgwin thundered at his daughter one day. "Drive him off — See him no more — he shall no longer be in my house — he is a deceiver." Summoned to her father's study, she read the anonymous letter her father had received, which hurled accusations against her suitor.

Caroline considered "the sudden dash from happiness to sorrow; the mysterious agency of the slanderer ... [and Clitherall's] hopeless situation." Their troubles read like the most sensational novel, with the stinging insults to masculine honor and the incalculable plunge in emotions, mystery and a hero trapped by forces he could neither identify nor fight. Clitherall's plight brought to Caroline's heart "a rush of love and a promise that I would receive no other to my heart." It made the story complete: A heroine realizes the truth of her passions and fervidly pledges herself to her wronged suitor.

Unlike most novels in which secrets and deceit

Caroline Clitherall recorded a history of honorable conduct that was a direct response to fictional heroines who realized too late the error of their choices.

More than the conduct-of-life advice written by men such as Richard Allestree and James Fordyce, novels enabled a community of reading — and writing — women to share information and ideas. Novels gave women opportunities to imagine a world that celebrated rather than suppressed them. Reading the novels that circulated in the Anglo-Atlantic world and bolstered by a newfound sense of their own virtue and authority, Southern women, too, sharpened their quills, dipped them in ink and inscribed the words they intended to guide the lives of future generations.

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*This essay has been adapted from Catherine Kerrison's Claiming the Pen: Women and Intellectual Life in the Early American South (Ithaca, N.Y., 2006) with permission of Cornell University Press.*