

The Meanings of Modesty: Education of Daughters in the Culture of the Nobility in Northern Europe in the late 18th Century

Summary

Jessica Parland-von Essen

By the end of the 18th century the daughters of the nobility in the northern parts of Europe received a quite different kind of education from their brothers. Although the cultural aims of the upbringing of girls were similar to that of boys, the practice of the raising of girls was less influenced by tradition. The education of boys was one of classical humanistic and military training, but the girls were more freely educated. The unity and exclusiveness of the culture of nobility were of great importance to the continued influence of this elite. The importance of education became even greater, partly because of the unstable political situation, and partly because of the changes the Enlightenment had caused in the perception of the human essence. The delicate and ambitious *hônnete homme* was expected to constantly strive to a greater perfection as a Christian. On the other hand, the great weight given to aesthetics – etiquette and taste – made individual variation of the contents of education possible.

Education consisted mainly in aesthetic studies; girls studied music, dancing, fine arts, epistolary skills and also the art of polite conversation. On the other hand, there was a demand for enlightenment, and one often finds personal political and social ambitions, which made competition in all skills necessary for the daughters as well.

Literary sources for the education of girls are Madame LePrince de Beaumont, Madame d'Épinay, Madame de Genlis and Charles Rollin. Other, perhaps even more important sources are the letters between parents and children and papers originating from studies. Diaries and memoirs also tell us about the practice of education in day to day life.

The approach of this study is semiotic. It can be stated that the code of the culture was well hidden from the outsider. This was achieved, for instance, by the adaptation of the foreign French language and culture. The core of the culture

consisted of texts which only thorough examples stated the norms which were expressed as good taste. Another important feature of the culture was its tendency towards theatricalisation. The way of life was dictated by taste, and moral values were included in the aesthetic norms through the constant striving for modesty. Pleasant manners were also correct in an ethical perspective. Morality could thus also be taught through etiquette.