

Studies in English, New Series

Volume 8

Article 12

1-1-1990

The Weaker Sex: Hannah Cowley's Treatment of Men in Her Comedies of Courtship and Marriage

Jean Gagen
University of Kansas

Follow this and additional works at: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/studies_eng_new



Part of the [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Gagen, Jean (1990) "The Weaker Sex: Hannah Cowley's Treatment of Men in Her Comedies of Courtship and Marriage," *Studies in English, New Series*: Vol. 8 , Article 12.

Available at: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/studies_eng_new/vol8/iss1/12

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at eGrove. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studies in English, New Series* by an authorized editor of eGrove. For more information, please contact egrove@olemiss.edu.

**THE WEAKER SEX: HANNAH COWLEY'S
TREATMENT OF MEN IN HER COMEDIES OF
COURTSHIP AND MARRIAGE**

Jean Gagen

University of Kansas

Hannah Cowley, who lived from 1743 to 1809, is just beginning to receive some of the notice and appreciation as a playwright which she deserves. A recent critic who refers to Cowley as the finest woman playwright since Aphra Behn perhaps overstates Cowley's merits.¹ Certainly Susanna Centlivre's achievement as a playwright earlier in the century has been much more widely recognized than Cowley's. Nevertheless, Hannah Cowley's plays deserve a place of honor in the roll call of eighteenth century playwrights. In fact, as early as 1782, the reviewer of *The Belle's Stratagem* in *The Critical Review*² asserted that this play was the "best dramatic production of a female pen...since the days of Centlivre, to whom Mrs. Cowley is at least equal in fable and character, and far superior in easy dialogue and purity of diction" (vol. 53, p. 314). The reason for the neglect of Cowley's plays in this century is not easy to understand. But the appearance in 1979 of the two volume edition of her plays edited by Frederick Link now makes her dramas much more readily accessible than formerly.³

Mrs. Cowley wrote thirteen plays—two of them tragedies—but her reputation rests on her comedies. The way in which she began writing for the stage has often been repeated. While attending a theatrical performance with her husband, she remarked, "Why I could write as well myself!" She took her husband's laughter as a challenge, and the next day she began to write a play that she eventually called *The Runaway*. She finished it quickly and sent it to Garrick to read; he encouraged her and suggested revisions. In 1776 Garrick presented the play at Drury Lane, where it met with more success than she dreamed possible. In fact, a reviewer for *The Critical Review* marveled at the skill which this "untutored genius" displayed (vol. 41, p. 239). Cowley continued to write for the stage for eighteen years, and many of her comedies were popular successes with long runs and frequent revivals.

Her characters are often stereotypes drawn from Restoration and earlier eighteenth century comedy, but at her best she is able to give them freshness and vitality. Although she was much more deeply influenced than Centlivre by the emphasis on moral reformation in drama, Cowley's desire to write plays free of moral offense did not stifle

108 THE WEAKER SEX: HANNAH COWLEY

her sense of humor. Her plays are full of laughter and wit. Not only did she have unusual skill in the handling of dialogue but she was also capable of portraying well a wide variety of types of characters. Her most celebrated characters are undoubtedly her witty young heroines, who are often the prime manipulators and intriguers in her plays, which usually center on courtship and marriage.

Cowley was not primarily a reformer or disturber of the status quo. She was not a feminist in any militant way. Yet in the independence, resourcefulness, and daring of her witty heroines, Cowley is surely making a statement about women, their capabilities, and their rights. She defined comedy as "a picture of life—a record of passing manners—a mirror to reflect to succeeding times the characters and follies of the present."⁴ One of the follies on which she often focused was the failure to respect and cultivate the minds of women and to give them more control over their lives, especially in the choice of a husband. She ridicules men who have patronizing attitudes towards women and who undervalue them and their abilities. Moreover, the agents of her ridicule are women of wit and ingenuity who are capable of manipulating and deceiving these men and gaining from them or in spite of them what they wish to have.

In *Who's the Dupe* (1779), a short farce which became one of Cowley's most popular dramatic productions, Cowley satirizes what she refers to in a perfunctory note as "the disgusting vulgarity in an upstart citizen." In the prologue, moreover, she remarks that since learned men and writers have often satirized the "petty foibles" and faults of women and exposed their "whims and vanity," she as a woman asks leave to laugh at these same learned men, whose sarcastic pens have spared neither "Matron Maid or Bride." And this is precisely what Cowley has done in this broadly amusing farce.

Old Doiley, the vulgar "upstart citizen," wealthy but ignorantly enamoured of "Larning," is the chief butt of Cowley's satire. Old Doiley is determined to have a son-in-law who is "Larned" and has chosen the pedant Gradus from Oxford to be his daughter Elizabeth's husband. Elizabeth, however, dupes both her father and Gradus and wins for her husband the man Granger whom she loves. She engineers the ruse by means of which Gradus is discredited as a learned man in her father's eyes, while Granger, who has never seen the inside of a university, entrances Old Doiley so thoroughly with his display of bogus learning that Doiley offers to leave him every farthing of his fortune if he will only marry Elizabeth.

The humor of this situation is made all the more pointed by the fact that when Old Doiley and Gradus are talking together shortly after

Gradus' arrival, Old Doiley complains of the money wasted on educating girls in such matters as French and dancing, "Jography" and "Stronomy," while Gradus eagerly seconds these opinions and extols those "immortal periods" when women could neither read nor write. Both men underestimate the wit of women and deservedly fall victim to the stratagems which Elizabeth devises in order to escape marriage with Gradus. Gradus, of course, is a familiar comic figure—the pedant who may know a great deal about what is in books, particularly ancient books, but who knows almost nothing about life in the real world, including women.

When Old Doiley repudiates Gradus in favor of Granger, Gradus knows that he has been duped and that the oration by means of which Granger has enraptured Old Doiley is only high-sounding, polysyllabic gibberish without a word of Greek in it. But Doiley, declaring himself the happiest man alive, remains in blissful ignorance of how completely he has been duped. In fact, he patronizingly urges Gradus to trot back to Oxford for further study so that he can learn the difference between Greek and English.

Letitia Hardy in *The Belle's Stratagem* (1782), Cowley's most popular comedy, faces a situation very different from that which confronted Elizabeth Doiley. Letitia was contracted in marriage to Doricourt when both of them were children. But until the time for their marriage was approaching, neither had seen each other for years. Unfortunately for Letitia, Doricourt is not impressed by Letitia's reputation as a beauty. "Why, she's *only* a fine girl: complexion, shape and feature; nothing more...she should have spirit! fire! *l'air enjoué!* that something, that nothing, which everybody feels, and which nobody can describe, in the resistless charmers of Italy and France" (I.iii.9). Despite this lack of enthusiasm for Letitia, Doricourt is nevertheless determined to do the honorable thing and marry her. Letitia, however, is deeply troubled over Doricourt's apparent indifference to her because she is more attracted to him than ever before. But she has no intention either of marrying a man who does not love her or of letting this handsome man she adores escape without a struggle.

She tells her father that she has a plan to win Doricourt's love, although this plan may seem a bit paradoxical. She intends to heighten Doricourt's indifference to actual dislike because she believes that "'tis much easier to convert a sentiment into its opposite, than to transform indifference into tender passion" (I.iv.18). Her plot, quite simply, is to appear before Doricourt as a simpleton, loud, garrulous, crude, and completely lacking in refinement. Doricourt is so thoroughly repelled

110 THE WEAKER SEX: HANNAH COWLEY

by her that he wants to set off for Bath that very night. But a friend who is privy to Letitia's plot persuades him to stay one night more and attend the masquerade.

At the masquerade, Doricourt notices how *divinely* a masked beauty dances. Soon he learns how bewitching as well as beautiful she is, how spirited and wild. Soon he is madly in love with this beautiful unknown, who, of course, is Letitia. Letitia continues to tease Doricourt and to refuse to show him her face. She also makes it quite clear that she will never be snared unless Hymen spreads the net to catch her.

On the advice of a friend, Letitia agrees to torment Doricourt further by seeing if he will promise to marry her even when he thinks she is a simpleton. Poor Doricourt is thus trapped, so to speak, into doing what he considers honorable—that is, marry a revolting simpleton.

Shortly after the wedding, Letitia, now disguised as the unknown beauty of the masquerade, enters and pretends to be deeply distressed over Doricourt's marriage. She claims that Doricourt's professions of love won her "Virgin heart," and that her honor is as spotless as that of the girl he has married. Her birth is also equal to his and her fortune large. Then she leaves Doricourt desperate with misery and wretchedness. Later, however, after a few more complications in the plot, Doricourt learns the identity of the masked lady and the tricks played on him. But he is overjoyed to find himself married to the witty and beautiful Letitia, who, because she has the "delicate timidity" of the English character, threw a veil over her charms. But now that he knows her better, he insists that no woman in France or Italy or even in the entire world could surpass her in delightfulness. Letitia's stratagem has worked. Her wavering, reluctant fiancé is now an ardent lover, and one supposes he will be an ardent husband too.

A Bold Stroke for a Husband (1783), set in Madrid, deals not with one woman but with two women who take bold strokes for husbands. In one case, Victoria, a deserted wife, regains her husband Don Carlos, who has succumbed to Laura, an unscrupulous fortune hunter; Don Carlos, in an alcoholic stupor, has even deeded to Laura the estate that came to him through his wife Victoria. In the other plot, Olivia repels two unwelcome suitors selected by her father and wins for her husband a man she truly loves. In these interwoven plots, women are the prime manipulators; they are the brains and boldness behind the strokes that gain them their husbands. In comparison with these women, the men are relatively weak and passive, and, in the case of Don Carlos, grossly culpable and foolish also.

Jean Gagen

111

Victoria has to overcome her repugnance for the role she feels compelled to play. But she is determined not merely to win back her husband, whom she still loves, but also the property, without which she and her children will be financially ruined. Disguised as a young man named Florio, she easily wins the love of the fickle Laura, who promptly discards Don Carlos, though she keeps the deed to the property he has given her.

Eventually Don Carlos appreciates the goodness of his wife and is half mad with remorse over his treatment of her and with fury over Laura's perfidy. In a rage he decides that he will kill this new paramour Florio. When he bursts in on Laura and Florio ready to plunge his sword into the bosom of his "blooming rival," Florio doffs his hat and reveals "himself" as Victoria, who now urges him to plunge the sword into her bosom since she has already been stabbed far more deeply by the anguish of betrayed love.

This is too much for Don Carlos, and we are simply told that "he sinks." Then Victoria rushes to him begging forgiveness for her too severe reproaches and assuring him that he is as dear as ever to her. When Carlos protests that she knows not what she does, for he has made her a beggar, she joyfully informs him of another bold stroke by means of which she has regained the estate he had deeded to Laura. She has engaged a friend to impersonate her uncle Don Sancho. He has convinced Laura that the deed Carlos had given her was invalid because Don Sancho himself was the owner of this property. In a rage, Laura tore up the deed. Now, realizing that she has been tricked out of this estate, Laura stalks out in a fury, vowing revenge, while Carlos turns to his "charming wife," full of gratitude and love.

Olivia's stratagems to free herself from the suitors chosen for her by her father and to win Julio instead are equally successful and much more light-hearted. She has repelled her music-loving suitor by claiming that the Jew's harp is her favorite instrument. She has driven another suitor away by posing convincingly as a shrew. She has also sought out Julio, met him at the Prado, and won his love while veiled and her identity unknown. Only after a number of amusing complications does she reveal her identity and accept him as her future husband. Thus the play ends with the restoration of a marriage and with an imminent marriage, both brought about by the bold strokes of two strong, ingenious, and daring women.

In *More Ways than One* (1786) another strong-minded and delightfully witty heroine appears in the person of Miss Archer. Beautiful, wealthy, and sophisticated, she has a well-cultivated mind, the experience of traveling in Europe, and the reputation for rejecting

112 THE WEAKER SEX: HANNAH COWLEY

scores of adoring suitors. Though she is under the guardianship of a wealthy and avaricious old man Evergreen, she is not in the least threatened by him in any way. Evergreen apparently has no control over her fortune and makes no attempt to arrange a marriage for her. In fact, he is eager to get rid of her. Annoyed by her impudence and independence, he tells her to go ahead and marry one of her suitors—she has his consent. But she tartly replies that she wants the consent of a much more important personage—herself. In the meantime, she is not yet ready to give up the right to make conquests. But when the time comes to “retire from the scene of action,” she promises to pick out the most constant of her adorers, to “go gravely with him to church,” then “drive soberly to the seat of his ancestors” and thereafter become a dutiful wife, studying family receipts and making wine. She ends her sarcastic picture of her future married life by claiming that when the sixteen year old girl Arabella whom Evergreen is planning to marry has become a “young widow,” she will invite her and her new husband to drink to Evergreen’s memory in a cup of “cowslip” of her own brewing (I, i, p. 6).

When Evergreen in a rage orders Miss Archer to seek new lodgings immediately, she cheerfully refuses and continues to twit her “own dear, sweet guardian” who in marrying a sweet young wife is going to become a “sweet simpleton, at the sweet age of sixty” (p. 7).

Evergreen’s prospective young bride is under the guardianship of her uncle Feelove, who is not only an avaricious but a ruthlessly incompetent physician. Moreover, he has subjected her to a repressive upbringing which has left her ignorant, naive, and utterly unable to help herself out of the predicament Feelove has placed her in by arranging for her to marry Evergreen. Raised in the country by two spinsters who taught her only such household arts as sewing and “making seed-cake, and stewing codlings,” she cannot read or write, has never heard of “Point or Brussels,” and her only card game is “beggar my neighbour.” Arabella knows so little about the ways of the world that she supposes she has to marry the old man Feelove has chosen for her. Feelove never allows her to stir from his home, and Evergreen intends to continue this kind of incarceration in his own home.⁵ But Arabella finds a sympathetic friend and mentor in Miss Archer. To Evergreen’s face she vows that no matter how stringently Evergreen tries to protect his young bride from the dangers of young men and the infections of fashionable life, she herself will teach this “pretty young cherub” to captivate the whole town and to acquire a greater desire for laces, feathers, diamonds, and fops than can be satisfied in six years. But what Miss Archer actually does for Arabella is much more

important. She helps her to escape marriage to Evergreen and to marry instead young Bellair, who had fallen so desperately in love with Arabella that he had feigned an illness in order to gain entrée into Feelove's home and be nursed by Arabella. Although Cowley avoids any suggestion of lasciviousness on the part of either Bellair or Arabella, the tears of pity Arabella feels for the supposedly dying Bellair are symptoms of her quite natural attraction to him. Her childlike frankness in expressing her distaste for Evergreen and her preference for Bellair is the source of several pleasant comic scenes.

When Bellair finally seizes an opportunity to declare his love to Arabella and to assure her that she need not marry the old man whom she detests, Arabella is delighted and astonished and more than willing to flee from Feelove's house with Bellair. Unfortunately, not knowing the identity of Arabella's prospective husband, Bellair takes her to Evergreen's home thinking that this "grave gentleman" will provide a sanctuary for her until Bellair can arrange the elopement. Cowley makes good comic use of Bellair's mistake and Evergreen's glee over it. But through the help of Miss Archer, all is still not lost.

When she learns that Evergreen has already hired a coach to whisk Arabella off to an unknown destination to protect her from Bellair, Miss Archer acts quickly. Evergreen has already enveloped Arabella in a large white riding cape and hood in preparation for her drive. But in the few moments that he is absent, Miss Archer bribes the foppish knight from the country, Sir Marvel Mushroom, who has fortunately appeared at just the right moment, to conceal himself in the riding cape and hood while she and Arabella jump into Marvel's waiting carriage. Miss Archer then directs the driver to take Arabella to a lodging for safekeeping.

Eventually everyone concerned with Arabella's future ends up at this lodging, where Bellair wins Feelove's consent to marry Arabella and both Feelove and Evergreen, though they angrily wrangle with each other, have to accept the fact that they have both been outwitted and outmaneuvered. Once again a resourceful and clever young woman has frustrated the attempt to force a young woman into a repulsive marriage as if she were a mere pawn in a financial negotiation.

During her efforts on behalf of Arabella, Miss Archer has been carrying on a rather tempestuous courtship of her own, marked by many misunderstandings. By the time Arabella's happiness is sealed, Miss Archer and Mr. Carlton, who are well suited to each other, are also looking forward to marriage.

Again in *School for Greybeards* (1786) a young girl Viola, who is about to be hustled into a marriage to a man she does not love, is

114 THE WEAKER SEX: HANNAH COWLEY

spared this fate through the help of a forceful and fearless young woman—in this case, her young mother-in-law Seraphina, who has recently married Viola's father Don Alexis. Don Alexis has already realized that he has made an ass of himself in marrying a mere girl, for he now knows from experience that it is easier "to spin cables out of cobwebs...than to manage a young rantipole wife" (I, p. 11). Seraphina often reminds us of Sheridan's *Lady Teazle* as she playfully torments her husband by her many pointed references to his age. She admits that she loves to sit on her balcony while "All the impudent young face-hunters in Lisbon" fall prostrate before her, "adoring, and deifying" her. In fact, she insists that she will enjoy admiration until she becomes "old, shrivell'd" and "grey-pated" as Don Alexis is now (II, pp. 18-19).

When Alexis threatens to block up all the windows and nail shut the doors to secure his honor, she retorts that if he cannot find better security than these devices, he'll be one of the herd of cuckholds. The best security for *his* honor, she tells him, is *her* honor: "It is due to my own feelings to be chaste—I don't condescend to think of you in the affair. The respect I bear myself, makes me necessarily preserve my purity—but if I am suspected, watch'd, and haunted, I know not but such torment may weary me out of principles, which I have hitherto cherish'd as my life" (II, p. 19).

Although marriage to Seraphina has taught Don Alexis that youth and age do not mix well in matrimony, the importance of love between the partners still escapes his rather dense mind. When his friend Don Gasper remarks that his son Don Octavio is sufficiently attracted to Alexis' daughter Viola to be willing to marry her, Don Alexis snaps at the suggestion. It apparently never occurs to him to consult Viola herself about her feelings.

Viola happens to be deeply in love with Don Sebastian and has no interest whatsoever in Don Octavio. Fortunately, when Octavio comes to woo Viola, he mistakes Seraphina for Viola and proceeds to woo her in all the trite, conventional ways, which provide her with a great deal of ironic amusement. Because she enjoys his mistake, she does not undeceive him. Then she suddenly realizes that she can use this mistake to help Viola escape from her father's house and meet and marry Don Sebastian. Seraphina as Viola convinces Octavio that she despises the sober, quiet prudence of a courtship which is approved by her father. Only if her father opposes the marriage and she will have to face all sorts of "blissful" difficulties, such as scaling ladders to elope and being pursued, will she believe that Octavio really loves her. Of course, all this very clearly reminds us of Sheridan's *Lydia Languish*.

Don Octavio unsuspectingly accepts all these conditions and persuades Alexis that they must plot against this "dear little madcap." Don Alexis accordingly *orders* Viola to see Octavio no more. In fact, Don Alexis is vastly amused by what he thinks is a clever ploy to secure Viola's marriage to Octavio while she imagines that she is eloping without her father's consent. Of course, it is Seraphina (still playing the part of Viola) who climbs down the ladder from Don Alexis' house, though she has stipulated that she has a friend who must accompany her. That friend is Viola who, once out of her father's house, meets and marries Don Sebastian. Thus, once again, men—both Don Alexis and Don Octavio—who regard women as property to be disposed of in marriage without any regard for their own inclinations—are outmaneuvered and made ridiculous by the sex which they patronizingly brand as the weaker sex.

Cowley apparently thought of marriage as the normal and desirable goal for women. Her witty heroines all look forward to marriage, but they demand a marriage based on love and mutual respect and trust, and they expect to have the deciding vote in the selection of their husbands. Cowley glorifies these women who are independent and resourceful, intelligent and well educated without becoming pedantic, and completely undeterred by the authority that men attempt to impose on them in the choice of their mates. Instead of weeping or arguing against the injustice of tyrannical fathers or guardians, they often devise very complicated stratagems by means of which they outwit would-be tyrants and win for husbands the men they love. Sometimes they also exercise their wit and ingenuity in rescuing some of the weaker members of their sex from the unwelcome marriages which domineering parents or guardians try to force on them. These courageous ladies have insight and initiative. They can think for themselves, make their own decisions, and act with intelligence and daring. They are Cowley's "new women."

NOTES

¹David W. Meredith, entry on Hannah Cowley, *Dictionary of British and American Women Writers, 1660-1800*, ed. Janet Todd (Totawa, 1985), p. 94.

²*The Critical Review* was a London publication. It is accessible in bound volumes at the British Library.

³All quotations are taken from this edition: *The Plays of Hannah Cowley*, ed. Frederick M. Link, 2 vols. (New York and London, 1979). *The Runaway, Who's the Dupe*, and *A Bold Stroke*

116 THE WEAKER SEX: HANNAH COWLEY

for a Husband are in volume 1; *More Ways than One* and *A School for Greybeards* are in volume 2.

⁴Advertisement to the first edition of *A Day in Turkey* (London, 1792), Link II, n. p.

⁵The portrayal of Arabella is reminiscent of that of Margery Pinchwife in Wycherley's *The Country Wife* (1675) and/or Agnes in Moliere's *School for Wives* (1667), to which, of course, Wycherley's play is clearly indebted.