

Horace walpole and samuel johnson, champions of women's rights



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Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* and Samuel Johnson's *The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia* both make excellent examples of the roles of women in the eighteenth century, including what those roles were supposed to be and what they actually were. Both texts treat women as generally fearful or timid with some acts of bravery or intelligence. However, of the two, *Otranto* treats women as incapable and depicts them without any rights while *Rasselas* treats women as intellectual equals for much of the book. However, when reading fictional tales such as these, one must remember that everything the characters do is a reflection on the author's thoughts, feelings or intentions. Unlike real life, things are not said or done by chance. Every action is a deliberate intention of the author. Therefore it is possible that Johnson's female characters were exemplifying to their female readers how beneficial it is to use their intelligence in life. Walpole's work, although it presents a stereotypical view of women on the surface, could have an ulterior motive as well. Perhaps it was excessively stereotypical so as to satirize society's expectations for women in the eighteenth century. It was at a time when women were expected to be submissive, timid, and obedient to husbands and fathers. But at this time certain feminist issues were coming to light. Women were becoming more involved in work outside the home, either directly or by helping their husbands. They were looking for equal rights in education, the workforce, and in the public sphere. However, since women's equality was a controversial subject, many authors such as Walpole and Johnson portray women to be weak, timid, fearful, and incapable of surviving without men on the surface. The out-of-character acts of courage or intelligence show an undercurrent of feminism reflective of what was going on in Eighteenth Century English culture. Women were supposed to be weak, <https://assignbuster.com/horace-walpole-and-samuel-johnson-champions-of-womens-rights/>

timid and helpless, and they were not supposed to break out of the roles of wife and daughter. This was starting to change, and the authors' work reflected that.

To a certain extent, both *Otranto* and *Rasselas* portray women as mothers, nurturers, wives, and as helpless, silly creatures in need of masculine protection, which were the typical roles women were supposed to play at the time. Nekayah and Pekuah of *Rasselas* are often shown as fearful throughout their adventures. This behaviour is contrasted several times to the valiant nature of the male characters. When the characters leave their Utopia for the first time, "The princess and her maid... considered themselves as in danger of being lost in a dreary vacuity.... The prince felt nearly the same emotions, though he thought it more manly to conceal them" (Johnson, 2700). Johnson again highlights the fearfulness of women when the group is about to enter the pyramids. Pekuah is too afraid to enter them, and because of this she is kidnapped by Arab robbers (2719-20). Here Pekuah's timidity costs her her freedom. Walpole also portrays women as weak and fearful at several times throughout *The Castle of Otranto*. The character of Bianca perfectly embodies this. She is superstitious, anxious, and ineffectual. When talking with her lady Matilda on page 37, she is interrupted by a noise and becomes so frightened that she begins swearing to St. Nicholas. Matilda assures her, "It is the wind... you have heard it a thousand times" (Walpole, 37). Bianca is eventually driven from the castle by her fear of the supernatural occurrences. Matilda also expresses fear when she faints upon learning that Theodore was to be executed (Walpole, 49).

The female characters of these two works did not only represent feminine fear, but also their dependency on men. Matilda, always cast aside and mistreated by her father, still acts as the dutiful daughter. Ferguson Ellis notes in the excerpt from *Otranto Feminized*, “ Earlier in the novel, and again on her deathbed, [Matilda] is a picture of obedience, declaring that “ a child ought not to have to ears or eyes, but as a parent directs” (59). This characterization reflects the most important role of the eighteenth century woman: to marry and bear children. After this task, women held little interest for their male counterparts. A woman had to consider very carefully how her actions would affect her father or husband before doing anything. Bianca also encourages the stereotyped roles of women and counsels Matilda to take a husband because “ A bad husband is better than no husband at all” (37), propagating the idea that every woman needs a man in order to survive, even if he is cruel to her. A woman in 2012 reading this might ask why a woman, subject to the authority of a cruel man, should be better off than supporting herself and living as she desires. However, the culture of the eighteenth century was such that it was not economically or socially possible for a woman to support herself and live on her own. Therefore it was expected and often necessary for a woman to take a husband, however uncaring. Isabella epitomizes the powerlessness of Eighteenth Century women. Throughout the novel she is barely treated as a human, and more like a business transaction. Her marriage situation is negotiated time and again, starting with Manfred usurping her for a wife to his son, and then trading his own daughter in marriage to Isabella’s father so that he may possess her himself. Though unhappy about her circumstances, Isabella will obey her father’s demands.

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Hippolita has the weaker qualities of the other female characters in the extreme. When Manfred wants to divorce her for another woman, though she has been nothing but faithful to him their entire lives, she willingly accepts, saying “ It is not ours to make election for ourselves; heaven, our fathers, and our husbands, must decide for us” (80), even though her acquiescence will force her daughter-in-law into an unfavourable position. Ferguson Ellis quotes Hippolita saying “ It is my duty to hear nothing that it pleases not my lord that I should hear” (58). Hippolita acts very similar to Matilda in this respect. She has no eyes or ears but what Manfred would want her to have. This is an exaggerated version of the position of every wife and daughter in the eighteenth century. All of these female characters have an unquestioning acceptance of the way things should be, which leads them to be submissive and passive about their situation in life. This is the role that women had to play. The exaggerated silliness of Hippolita and other Otranto women makes one wonder, what is the author trying to illustrate? Walpole might be of a misogynist mindset. Or he might be satirizing the cultural norm by exaggerating this behaviour in the characters of Hippolita, Bianca, and some instances of Isabella and Matilda. Readers know that women are not really like this. To assume that women agreed to the roles put upon them by men and society is to assume that women were fundamentally different in the eighteenth century from how they are today, and that is just not possible.

If the Gothic heroine was supposed to be more feminist than other ladies of literature, Otranto fails in that respect. Hippolita is not a strong character at all, Bianca is overpowered by her timidity, and while Matilda and Isabella

show instances of bravery, their actions are overall subject to the will of the men in their lives. *Rasselas* has a theme with more equality between the sexes. Johnson argues that women of his time were taking on the roles prescribed to them by society, obedience, passivity, deference et cetera; but that their circumstances would greatly improve if they could throw off these shackles and use their independence and intelligence to their advantage. Both Nekayah and Pekuah are quite fearful and cowardly in the beginning of their adventure from the Happy Valley, but their characters evolve drastically. This is exemplified in the women's interactions with the astronomer. He is originally disinclined to talk to Nekayah and Pekuah, but he turns out to be impressed by their knowledge and wit. " She told her tale with ease and elegance, and her conversation took possession of his heart... He looked upon her as a prodigy of genius... They came again and again, and were every time more welcome than before. The sage endeavored to amuse them, that they might prolong their visits, for he found his thoughts grow brighter in their company" (Johnson, 2737). In fact, both he and Pekuah's kidnapper value the women's conversation so much that they are unwilling to see them go. Here Johnson again demonstrates how women can use their intelligence to their advantage in the world. It's not that the Eighteenth Century woman is not smart, it is that she has been trained not to show her knowledge, especially publicly. When Imlac says that the astronomer will think her too stupid to converse with, Pekuah defends herself by saying, " My knowledge is perhaps more than you imagine it ... by concurring always with his opinions I shall make him think it greater than it is" (Johnson, 2737). Not only is Pekuah smart, but she is manipulative enough to deceive a learned man. This is the kind of intelligence women were not supposed to have let <https://assignbuster.com/horace-walpole-and-samuel-johnson-champions-of-womens-rights/>

alone display in the company of men. By giving this to Pekuah, Johnson is asserting that women are capable of this level of intelligence and can benefit from its use. Education for women was also a priority for this author. At the end of *Rasselas*, Nekayah expresses a desire to start a college for women. This is an astounding inference to make at a time where women only went to college to secure husbands or learn to be good housekeepers. Johnson was advocating for women to be educated, intelligent and virtuous, and he argued that these women made better wives and mothers and contributed more to society.

Walpole's female characters are not nearly as emancipated as Johnson's. However they display the odd moment of bravery and sense. Isabella, when threatened by Manfred with a proposal, does not acquiesce and flees through the castle to avoid the disastrous fate. This effort to escape shows a determination and self-possessiveness that the other females lack. However, Matilda's courage surpasses Isabella's when she frees Theodore: " Though filial duty and womanly modesty condemn the step I am taking, yet holy charity, surmounting all other ties, justifies this act. Fly; the doors of thy prison are open" (Walpole, 64). Even in her moment of courage, Matilda is concerned with how she is betraying her father despite his lifelong mistreatment of her. So why does Walpole bother to give his female characters any bravery when he's made them helpless in the rest of the novel? Women have always been smart, capable creatures, and yet they have been portrayed otherwise in art and literature. Around this time women were starting to stand up for themselves and speak up for their rights. But it was still uncomfortable for authors to portray and people to read about

women as fully put-together, independent people. Perhaps this is why you see them portrayed as mainly helpless with these few instances of cleverness.

The role of women in eighteenth century England was a limited one. It included high expectations for behaviour, restrictions on intelligence and opinion. However, it is hard to believe that women accepted these roles without contention. Women have always been as strong and intelligent as they are today, but in the Eighteenth Century this fact was just coming to light. It is clear from these arguments that while both texts illustrate women as useless and dependent, it is not without a purpose. Johnson does so briefly and only to show how much the women's lives improve once they change this behaviour as an example to the women of his time. Walpole does so excessively so as to mock and criticize the roles women were supposed to carry out in eighteenth century society. At this point in history it was becoming more and more apparent that these roles were not practical nor fair, and authors like Samuel Johnson and Horace Walpole were beginning to speak out against them in this implicit manner. One must keep in mind the historical context while reading novels of this time. When doing this, one has a better view of eighteenth century literature and history as a whole.

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