

# **Women, Religion and Education in Early Modern England**

Kenneth Charlton



**Also available as a printed book  
see title verso for ISBN details**

# **Women, Religion and Education in Early Modern England**

The education of women and girls in the Tudor and Stuart periods was inextricably linked to their perceived place in the religious order. *Women, Religion and Education in Early Modern England* is a study of the nature and extent of the education of women at this time in the context of both Protestant and Catholic ideological debates.

Taking a comprehensive definition of education, the author relates oral and written instruction to the spiritual, social and economic status of women. Through an examination of the role of women as recipients and as agents in religious instruction, this book offers wider insights both into the controls placed on women and the freedoms available to them.



# **Women, Religion and Education in Early Modern England**

Kenneth Charlton



London and New York

First published 1999

by Routledge

11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada

by Routledge

29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group*

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2001.

© 1999 Kenneth Charlton

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data*

Charlton, Kenneth.

Women, religion, and education in early modern England/Kenneth Charlton.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-415-18148-8 (hb)

1. Christian education of girls – England – History. 2. Women – Education – England – History. 3. England – Church history – 1485–

I. Title.

BV1577.C48 1999

268'.4 – dc21

98-33130

CIP

ISBN 0-415-18148-8

ISBN 0-203-00696-8 Master e-book ISBN

ISBN 0-203-17334-1 (Glassbook Format)

# Contents

	<i>Preface</i>	vii
	<i>Abbreviations</i>	ix
	Introduction	1
1	Attitudes to women	10
	<i>Nature and nurture</i> 10	
	<i>Status</i> 27	
2	The media	57
	<i>In church</i> 57	
	<i>Out of church</i> 63	
3	The methods	77
	<i>Learning to read</i> 78	
	<i>Listening and memory aids</i> 84	
	<i>Example and exemplars</i> 92	
	<i>Ambience: punishment and reward</i> 97	
	<i>When?</i> 100	
4	Women as recipients	106
	<i>The family and religious education</i> 106	
	<i>Advices</i> 118	
5	Away to school	126
	<i>In the household of another</i> 126	
	<i>Academies</i> 131	
	<i>Elementary schools</i> 142	

vi *Contents*

6	Women as agents	154
	<i>Gadders to sermons</i>	154
	<i>Private prayer</i>	167
	<i>Closet meditation</i>	171
	<i>Women's reading</i>	177
7	Mothers as educators	188
	Conclusion	241
	<i>Notes</i>	244
	<i>Bibliography</i>	298
	<i>Primary sources</i>	298
	<i>Secondary sources</i>	309
	<i>Index</i>	321

# Preface

A project which started over ten years ago, with the aim of writing a book on the education of women and girls in early modern England in all its aspects, was soon overtaken by a realisation that the projected chapter on their religious education was so complex that a book on that aspect alone was required, and so it has turned out. If such a book were to be attempted for the late twentieth century, the distinction between religious and moral education would have to be made. Not so in the early modern period, when the two were virtually synonymous. Moreover, in early modern England religious education could hardly be discussed unless in a political context, with heresy being equated with treason. 'Religious education', then, is a coat of many colours, as we shall see.

In preparing this end-product I owe an enormous debt to other workers in the field of early modern history, whose writings, produced for purposes quite different from my own, have nevertheless led me to primary sources which have enabled me to enrich my own enquiries. My notes and bibliography will make clear my indebtedness. I acknowledge with thanks the permission granted by the editors of *Westminster Studies in Education*, *History of Education* and *History of Education Quarterly* for permission to make use of material which I had previously published in their journals and which is noted at appropriate places in the notes. I also wish to acknowledge with gratitude the generous support of the Leverhulme Trust for an Emeritus Research Fellowship and of the Rockefeller Foundation for that most marvellous 'gift of an interval', a 'Scholars in Residence' Fellowship at the Villa Serbelloni in Bellagio, Italy, each of which enabled me in the early stages of the project to organise and reorganise my thoughts to such effect.

But my greatest indebtedness in this regard is to the staff of the Reading Room and North Library of the British Library – as I still find difficulty in describing that institution. For 40 years I have benefited from their unfailing skill, courtesy and good humour. For that I am extremely grateful as I attempt



– with them – to learn how to use the technology of the new library at St Pancras. The staff at other libraries, the Bodleian, Dr Williams' Library and the Institute of Historical Research, have facilitated my work, but none for so long and so regularly as those at 'the BM'.

I have also to thank Mrs Carol Dunn for so expertly transforming my own two-finger efforts into an acceptable typescript.

To my wife Maud, mother, professional woman and organiser *par excellence*, I owe far more than this book can ever repay. Without her patient support it would never have been completed.

Kenneth Charlton  
London 1998

# Abbreviations

BL	British Library
Cal. S. P. Dom.	<i>Calendar of State Papers Domestic</i>
DNB	<i>Dictionary of National Biography</i>
Donne, Sermons	<i>The Sermons of John Donne</i> , eds E. M. Simpson and G. R. Potter, 10 vols, 1953, Berkeley, Cal.
EETS	Early English Text Society
Erasmus, Collected Works	<i>The Collected Works of Erasmus</i> , 1974–, Toronto
Foxe	<i>The Acts and Monumentes of John Foxe</i> , eds G. T. Townsend and S. R. Cattley, 4 vols, 1837–41
Frere and Kennedy	<i>Articles and Injunctions of the Period of the Reformation</i> , Alcuin Club Collections, 3 vols, 1910
HMC	Historical Manuscripts Commission
Hughes and Larkin	P. H. Hughes and J. F. Larkin, eds, <i>Tudor Royal Proclamations</i> , 3 vols, 1964–69, New Haven
Lisle Letters	<i>The Lisle Letters</i> , ed., M. St C. Byrne, 6 vols, 1981, Chicago
PCC	Prerogative Court of Canterbury
PMLA	<i>Publications of the Modern Languages Association</i>
TRHS	<i>Transactions of the Royal Historical Society</i>
VCH	Victoria County History
Verney Memoirs	<i>The Memoirs of the Verney Family During the Civil War</i> , eds F. P. and M. M. Verney, 4 vols, 1892–99



# Introduction

In the summer of 1988 Pope John Paul II issued as an Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* (*The Dignity of Women*). Though he deals with the matter in general terms, the immediate issue he was addressing was whether women should become priests and, in saying they should not, he indicated what they *should* be – adored and cherished in the church as wives, mothers, sisters and nuns; they are ‘different by nature’ from men and should not, therefore, ‘try to appropriate masculine characteristics’. In expressing this view he was, of course, reiterating an opinion commonly held in early modern England about the nature of women and their role in society, and a scrutiny of these earlier views will provide the ground for the purpose of this book which is to see whether, and if so, in what ways, they affected attitudes to and the provision of education for women and girls, and of their religious education in particular.

Most often, when ‘education’ (of whomsoever) is discussed, first thoughts centre on what is to be taught, on the content of education, and on the methods of teaching deemed appropriate to that content. The discussion may then move on to who should be the teachers, who the taught; when this education should take place and where. It is only when these, at first sight, eminently practical questions have been adumbrated and discussion is in train that we become aware that certain assumptions have been made as to whether this education should take place at all, and if so, for purposes that appear so self-evidently agreed by all as not to require expression.

In considering these two sets of issues – the practically pedagogical and the logically prior – it would be tempting to label them the ‘practice’ and the ‘theory’ of education, save that the former set require their own further distinctions to be made: between prescription and actuality, between what ought to be done and what was actually undertaken and achieved. In early modern England there was (and indeed there still is) considerable debate about each of these variables. Moreover, what actually happened, what the people of the past actually did (and even why they did it) is far from providing

## 2 *Women, religion and education in early modern England*

a complete picture of the past, since this is to ignore another ‘actuality’, what the people of the past actually thought and said *should* be done, their hopes and aspirations being as much a part of their ‘actual’ lives as their subsequent actions.

It becomes crucial, therefore, to include in any description and discussion of the part religious education played in the lives of women and girls in early modern England (or any other group at any other time) – that is, the what? the how? the by whom? the where? and the when? – an ‘ought’ variable, so that we weave into the cloth of education a weft of prescription through the warp of what actually transpired. Prescriptive literature, after all, concerned itself not only with ‘what ought to be the case’ in the future, but also with what was seen to be the *best* of current practice, just as the flood of complaining, ‘now-a-daies’ polemic so plainly referred to the *worst* of current practice. Moreover, to be effective, prescription had to be seen as being not so far removed from possible achievement as to be pejoratively dismissed as ‘ideal’, incapable of realisation. Authors themselves had to feel that their prescriptions were in some sense reasonable, and it would be taking a proper degree of scepticism too far to assert that it was otherwise. No prescriptive writer wrote as if no one else shared his views, as if those views had been plucked out of the air, out of a cloud-cuckoo land. Too often such prescriptive contributions to the debate about the religious education of women and girls have been summarily dismissed as having little to do with what actually happened, too often contrasted unfavourably with actual examples. The distinction between ‘theory’ and ‘practice’, therefore, should never be drawn too sharply, and certainly not with an implied (negative) value-judgement built into its use.

Since the study is not confined to a particular point in time, a chronological variable has also to be incorporated. Just as every moment in time has its own past, present and future, so then must ‘change’ figure in any complete picture. Early modern England saw great changes, at some points (such as the Protestant Reformation, the Cromwellian Commonwealth) dramatic, even revolutionary, at other times less so. But even dramatic change, though unhesitatingly embraced by some, may be grudgingly accepted by others and emphatically rejected by others. In our modern search for originality and innovation it is all too easy to forget that this period was also one in which tradition – custom – was powerfully influential, its presence celebrated by some as a matter of considered judgement (after appropriate scrutiny) but by others as a matter of unthinking acceptance, justified, if at all, in terms of ‘what was good enough for my forebears is good enough for me’.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, tradition often took on or was accorded a sacral quality, with inherited forms of thought, feeling and action considered so self-evidently to be valued as to be immune from scrutiny.<sup>2</sup> Certainly this is what was relied on by some of

those in authority who sought justification for their injunctions to others, disguising vested interest as ‘past experience’ in order to rationalise inertia. In considering education in past times, then, the historian would do well to heed T. S. Eliot’s comment about poetry:

The work of any poet exists by reason of its connections with past work, both in continuation and divergence; what we call his originality is simply his special relationship to tradition, and each poet’s relation to that tradition changes the tradition itself.<sup>3</sup>

The complexity of the issues as well as the contradictory nature of the debates will clearly preclude a simple developmental sense of ‘change’ – whether for better or for worse – in the chronology of religious education in early modern England. Change, if it does take place, is rarely neat; it is certainly not linear, nor uniform on all fronts. It is messy, untidy, even chaotic in its production of unintended consequences.

It will be seen then, that a study of religious education such as this will require an inclusive rather than an exclusive use of the term ‘education’ and, more particularly, an avoidance of the equating of ‘education’ with ‘schooling’, if by that is meant what is transacted in the formal institution called ‘school’. That other educative agency, the church, long pre-dated the school, and Osbert Sitwell’s observation that he was ‘educated during the vacations from Eton’ reminds us that the family, pre-dating both school and church, continues to have a role as an educative agency. Moreover, outside these three relatively enclosed environments, the big wide world has also to be considered, if only because those in authority constantly used it through processions, progresses and pageants, as well as public forms of punishment (of which the Marian burnings were only the most extreme) to press home particular messages to the populace. The relative influence of any one of these forms of education has been a matter of perennial debate in the past, and remains so to this day. The heterogeneity of educational experience is not, however, in doubt. The history of education is no longer concerned simply with schooling in schools, but it is most certainly about teaching and learning, about a cultural negotiation – what Bouwsma has called ‘the preservation, cultivation and transmission of meaning’.<sup>4</sup>

The distinction implied above between ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ education is useful though hardly watertight, and certainly this applies to any consideration of the religious education of women and girls in early modern England, whether they were recipients or agents in that education. The formulation ‘women, religion and education’ has therefore been preferred since, though for the most part they were recipients of religious education, they were also on

important occasions prime movers in the matter, and in the case of mothers crucially so. Plenty has been written about the ‘learned ladies’ of the past, but remarkably little about how far and in what ways they acquired their learning and, more importantly, passed on their learning to their own children. That some women in the past were ‘learned’, ‘cultivated’, ‘educated’ in the achievement sense, is not difficult to demonstrate. Precisely how they came to achieve that learning, by what means, at whose hands, is rather more difficult. And it is even more so when we seek to find out whether and how they transmitted this to their children, *a fortiori* when it is the many women to be considered rather than the few. The aim here, then, is to consider women and girls not only as the target of educational provision, but also as agents of both prescription and provision. The reproductive function of the older generation *vis-à-vis* the younger worked essentially to maintain differential roles for their male and female members and, whilst gender identity could be the product of self-education, there was no doubt in the minds of most that gender differentiation was to be the accepted aim of the education of the younger generation by the older.

No historian writing in the late twentieth century about women and girls – least of all a male historian – can proceed without some reference to the literature of feminism, both in general and with reference to his own chosen topic and period. If he chooses to write about women, he would be extremely insensitive if he did not feel some fellow sympathy for Daniel entering a den which some feminists have insisted should be reserved to themselves. What this particular male historian has learned, not *de novo*, but with an increasingly immediate awareness, is the continuing influence of a male-orientated cultural biography. One’s education as a historian has, of course, insisted on the need to be aware of one’s own involuntary biases – but not with the stridency of the reminders provided by some representatives of the feminist movement, as for example when Renata Duelli Klein asserts, ‘In my view there is no room for men in Women’s Studies, *none whatsoever*.’<sup>5</sup> This may no longer be a view shared by all or even a majority of Klein’s feminist colleagues working in the field of history, and in any case this is not the place to enter into a full-scale critique of ‘feminist history’. Suffice it to say that this particular study is not intended to be a feminist history, if that involves a form of presentism which co-opts early modern female writers to the cause of twentieth-century feminism, which seeks to find harbingers of late-twentieth-century liberated women, or which deplores the failure of certain writers of the early modern period to share late-twentieth-century views as to what the status and role of women should be. There remains the far from completed task of recovering the lived experience of women, of retrieving and making visible that particular part of the human race whose existence has for so long failed to find a place on the

pages of books written, for the most part, by males. The modest aim of this book is to redress the balance in some small way, to consider and understand a mental world which requires the prior and occasionally tedious job of listing what the people of that world thought and did, and how they explained themselves to their contemporaries, in order to understand how the godly community (of all denominations) operated to maintain itself and those of its individual members who happened to be female. There is no theoretical framework, no explanatory model, either of which, it seems to me, is likely to conceal rather more than it illuminates. If – and it's a very large if – we are to follow the eye-catching terminology of Emmanuel le Roy Ladurie, I prefer to think of myself as a 'truffle hunter' rather than a 'parachutist'. When we get down to the detail of the topic, to the multiplicity of voice, male and female, we find what after all we might expect to find if we put aside a predilection for clear-cut categories – not so much regularity, uniformity, pattern, but ambivalence, contradiction, uncertainty, doubt. It is the untidiness of human life, its incompatibilities, cross-currents, collisions, that impress, with inconsistencies having a precarious but paradoxically continuous existence in the attitudes and actions of individuals. As Olwen Hufton has noted, 'There is no single history to be told of the history of women in any period, but rather many stories.'<sup>6</sup> Movement there is, but social processes rarely operate simply, least of all in one direction. What Oscar Wilde said of literature is true of history: 'The truth is rarely pure and never simple. Modern life would be very tedious if it were either, and modern literature a complete impossibility',<sup>7</sup> but in this he was merely echoing what Sir Philip Sidney had written three centuries before, when he reminded his readers that the affairs of men – and of women too – 'receive not geometrical certainties'.<sup>8</sup> A perpetual sitting on the fence may turn out to be rather painful, but the remedy (cure is hardly the word) of jumping down would affect only the symptoms, leaving the cause untouched, since the motion would ignore the simplistic dualism of the metaphor. Resort to formulations such as 'on the other hand', 'even so', 'yet', as well as the metaphoric two-sided coin, is in the absence of serial data of a quantifiable sort virtually unavoidable, but should nevertheless not be taken too literally.

Throughout, as wide a range of sources as possible has been used, from philosophical and theological treatises to their abridged versions in the form of manuals of exhortation, to sermons, to the early modern equivalents of medieval *florelegia*, to the broadside sheet and proverb, as well as to private letters, autobiographies and 'advices'. Almost all of these were written by men or, if by women, by those with the early modern equivalent of Virginia Woolf's '£500 a year and a room of one's own',<sup>9</sup> each of which provides its own set of methodological problems. During the period under consideration, and increasingly so, women began to publish their own work, though the



statistical untypicality of these writers has to be borne in mind. Where reference has been made to dramatic literature and poetry, my use has been based not on the belief that the writers of the period had, by definition, a specially accurate perception of their life and times, least of all that they were being autobiographical, but that their writings offer the historian some clues about attitudes, beliefs and behaviours which readers and audiences would have found sufficiently close to their own experiences (and prejudices) to enable the process of identification (or rejection) to be set in train. Literary theory of the period had it that the writer should aim in his writing to both delight and instruct. My interest in dramatic literature and poetry in this context lies not in the view that he should, but that he did – the historical question being whether ‘literature’ provides a kind of evidence which, placed alongside and compared with other kinds of evidence, will help illuminate the topic under investigation. Such a claim implies that we in the late twentieth century and they in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are, in some degree, familiar with the characters on the stage or in the poem. We may be surprised by the behaviour of the character or the nature of the idea being expressed. We may think that the behaviour is ‘wrong’, but that does not make the character or the idea any less credible. However ‘fantastike’ a writer may make one of his characters, that character must retain some likeness(es) to the members of the audience or readership – who will reserve the right to vary their responses, in much the same way as audiences hearing the song ‘Fings ain’t what they used to be’<sup>10</sup> may and do variously respond along a continuum from ‘Thank God’ to ‘More’s the pity’. The point was well recognised in our period as, for example, when Montaigne reminded his readers that

Speech belongs half to the speaker, half to the listener. The latter must be prepared to receive it according to the motion it takes, as among tennis players the receiver moves and makes ready according to the motion of the striker and the nature of the stroke.

Or as he put it in another essay, using a metaphor of very early origin, ‘The bee plunders the flowers here and there, but afterwards they make of them honey which is all theirs, it is no longer thyme or marjoram.’<sup>11</sup> But, of course, without the thyme and marjoram the bee would not have been able to make that particular batch of honey and, to thoroughly mix the metaphors, if literature is to be regarded as in some way or other mimetic in nature and purpose it will take a multi-faceted mirror, not a simple one, fully to reflect what is there to be seen. The fictive literature of the period is full of textual representation and reproduction of men, women and children acting both in public and in the relative privacy of the family. But the dramatist provides only *clues* about

their characters, clues which he knows full well will be interpreted in quite different ways by different members of his audience; indeed, it is part of his art to so arrange his clues that such reactions are produced. It is for others to insist that dramatic literature should be approached as ‘words on the page’ or as ‘performance on the stage’ – and even (as they commonly do) to insist that theirs is the only legitimate way of proceeding. The historian, however, is interested in how far the people of the past, of his chosen part of the past, may be found in the text, and – though this is more problematic – how far these people reacted, by report, to the attitudes and behaviours of the writer’s characters.

Conscious of the complexities of the task, the problem of presentation has to be faced. The topic is a taxonomist’s nightmare. The neatest breakdown would be to make a class-based distinction and to divide the book into the education of the few and the education of the many but since neither of these, in the matter of religious education, is specific to itself such a presentation would result in a good deal of repetition. The points which will be addressed are, therefore:

- 1 whether girls and women should be educated and, if so, on what grounds and for what purposes (whether and why);
- 2 who should be educated (who);
- 3 at what stage in a female’s life should her religious education take place and where should it be located (when and where);
- 4 what should be the content of that education (what);
- 5 what methods of teaching were deemed to be desirable and efficient (how);
- 6 who would be the teachers (by whom).

In each case – whether and why? when and where? what? how? for whom? by whom? – multiplicity and heterogeneity rather than simplicity and homogeneity will predominate and, with the provisos mentioned earlier, each will require a consideration of its own prescription and its own practice, with the variables of gender, age and class constantly needing to be borne in mind.

None of the materials (or indeed the concerns) of the book is susceptible of quantification in any statistical sense of the term.<sup>12</sup> Where household and family size, age of menarche, age of marriage, etc. are referred to in general terms, I have relied on current historiographical literature (which has its own methodological problems). My interest lies in actual rather than aggregated people, in individuals struggling to shape their lives to suit their own particular situations and purposes, though plainly I wish to know whether and in what

degree particular attitudes and practices were shared or not. But such knowledge can be quantified only in the roughest sort of way by the collection and comparison of particular instances, by the cumulative weight of fragmentary evidence, which is the historian's traditional (though far from perfect) way of proceeding. All kinds of factors, some quite contingent, others inherent in the topic and period under discussion, combine to limit the number of instances which can be presented. In a sense all the women referred to are extraordinary, in that they have left a mark on the historical record, but the haphazard nature of their survival precludes any use of the term 'sample', especially since the evidence is heavily weighted towards the upper and middle classes. The difficulty of detecting the voices of ordinary people is, moreover, compounded when the voices sought are female.

This is not a book simply about women and girls, but about males and females and their inextricably bound relationships, and how these affected and were affected by conceptions such as virtue, obedience, citizenship, power.<sup>13</sup> However, since it was a preoccupation of the period, it is also about sex differences, and how far and in what terms these were to be identified, and then maintained or minimised by the social mechanics of education in our extended sense of the term. Without doubt, it was believed in the early modern period that sex differences were 'natural'. From the moment of conception the sex of a child was endlessly discussed – strength of kick, position in the womb and so on – and, theological exhortation notwithstanding, a boy-child was preferred, giving rise to expectations and aspirations which not surprisingly led to disappointment and differential treatment of siblings, not least in their education. As with sex differences themselves, it was but a short step from contemporary anatomy and physiology to value-judgement and the ideology of the 'eternal feminine' – in a Christian and male-dominated culture. Even so, 'identification' on the part of the child and 'labelling' on the part of others did not necessarily work in the same direction of the current male hegemony, as we shall see when we come to consider women as the target of educational prescription, as the agent in educational practice, as the consumer of educational provision – a consideration which will lead us into the affective as well as the cognitive life of women. Whether it is possible, as Lucien Fèbvre hoped, to reinstate the emotional life of the past and to enter the shadowy regions of motive, of expectation, of aspiration, of the workings of individual conscience and choice,<sup>14</sup> a consideration of our topic can hardly avoid the attempt, as long as we remember that the tensions between freedom of choice and submission to authority were not the monopoly of one sex.

Myra Reynolds and Dorothy Gardiner have pioneered the field of women's education, to be followed, with their varying emphases, by Carol Camden,

Ruth Kelso and Dorothy Stenton.<sup>15</sup> Yet it was not too long ago that Joyce Irwin, commenting on the comparative lengths of the chapters in which she gathered her extracts of *Womanhood in Radical Protestantism 1525–1675* (1979), noted that ‘the chapter on women’s education is relatively brief’. Rosemary Masek, a year later, concluded that ‘The story of women’s education is an important part of the whole history of Tudor–Stuart education which has yet to be written.’<sup>16</sup> Back in 1965, my own book *Education in Renaissance England* grossly under-represented women, and even in 1982, when Women’s Studies were much more visible, Rosemary O’Day allocated not much more space to the topic in her *Education and Society 1500–1800*. More recently, Roland Bainton, Retha Warnicke, Diane Willen, Joan Douglass, Patricia Crawford and Margaret Spufford have made important contributions to a history of the religious life of women in the early modern period. This particular contribution, surprisingly, is the first to attempt a systematic consideration of a major aspect of women and education in that period. One devoutly hopes it will not be the last. Indeed, the present healthy state of Women’s Studies will almost certainly ensure it will not, as the recent perceptive and questioning article by Penny Corfield makes clear.<sup>17</sup>

# 1 Attitudes to women

## NATURE AND NURTURE

A society concerned (to an almost obsessive degree) with religion and, most immediately, with the scriptural basis of that religion not surprisingly turned first and foremost to the scriptures for statements about the nature of women, from which it would be possible to justify claims about women's status in society and an education deemed appropriate to that status (albeit in a society with a male Godhead, a male Saviour and a male priesthood, and in a society largely governed by men). Again, not surprisingly, the scriptures served to provide proof-texts for just about every kind and level of claim in the matter. Shakespeare was merely reflecting a common awareness when he had Antonio warn Bassanio that 'the Devil can cite scripture for his purpose'.<sup>1</sup>

Human nature, and the efficacy of education in controlling or modifying it, had for long been a matter of discussion by classical authors, by the early Christian Fathers and by medieval theologians. Much of the 'pagan' thought on the matter was assimilated into Christian theology, but always in the context of notions about 'childhood' and its modification by 'original sin'. Even so, theological doctrine was rarely homogeneous, and Reformation theology hardly improved matters, especially when it attempted to simplify the presentation of doctrine to suit the perceived needs and capabilities of the newly enfranchised 'priesthood of all believers'. Moreover, despite their insistence on man's post-Lapsarian 'depravity', few Reformers wished to abandon their humanist predecessors' emphasis on the dignity of man, and on man's 'natural' faculty of reason, which above all things enabled him to distance himself from the world of 'brutish beasts'.

The problem was further complicated by differences of opinion not only about the spiritual state of a new-born infant but also about the nature and length of childhood itself. For most writers, 'infancy' took the new-born 'babe' or 'nursling' up to the age of 7, with, according to the commonly accepted

five-fold classification of Galen, 'childhood' continuing to 15, when 'adolescence' started, continuing to 25. Curiously (to modern ears at least) the period from 25 to 35 was categorised as 'youth', which was followed by 'middle age' until 49, and an 'old age' thereafter. Shakespeare's 'seven ages', ending with 'second childishness and mere oblivion; Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything' was merely one of several categorisations then current.<sup>2</sup>

Certainly the age of 7 was taken by most to mark some kind of boundary. William Harrington, for example, insisted that it was the age at which boys and girls should cease to sleep in the same bed.<sup>3</sup> Sir Thomas Elyot recommended it as the age at which boys should be taken from the company and oversight of women.<sup>4</sup> Thomas Wilson noted that 'every child of 6 or 7 years . . . is forced to act whereby he gaineth his own living and something beside to help enrich his parents or master'.<sup>5</sup> It was the age, too, when children were, canonically at least, expected to reach the age of spiritual maturity – 'the age of discretion' – and thus to go through the rites of confirmation, though not necessarily to take communion, which generally had to await physical maturity.<sup>6</sup> It was about this time too that the other *rite de passage* for boys – wearing 'breeches' in place of 'skirts' – took place, Isabella Twysden for example, reporting that her son Roger 'was put into breeches the 15 October 1648, being somewhat above six years old'.

Even more important for our immediate concern, discussions about the first stage of 'infancy' (up to 7) rarely made any effort to differentiate between the sexes. Debates about suckling, baptism, bodily care, spiritual development and the like were carried on by reference to the generic 'child' or 'infant'. Not surprisingly in a male-dominated age, any reference to generic 'child' or 'man' was almost invariably followed by the personal pronoun 'he', though, as Calvin found it necessary to point out, 'Why, even children know that women are included under the term "men"!'<sup>7</sup>

But whatever categorisation was used by Protestant writers in early modern England concerning the length of childhood, the vast majority followed Augustine in indicating its nature. Acknowledging the validity of Psalm 51.5, 'I was shapen in iniquity, and in sin conceived by my mother' and, recalling his own youthful sinfulness, Augustine answered his own rhetorical question 'Is this childish innocence?' with an emphatic 'It is not, Lord, it is not.'<sup>8</sup> Throughout the literature, proof-texts from the Old Testament predominate, often from Proverbs but more especially from Psalms 58.3: 'For the wicked go astray from the womb; they go astray as soon as they are born', as in Cranmer's *Catechismus*. The point was put in down-to-earth fashion in the mid-sixteenth century Boy-Bishop sermon from Gloucester, when the preacher enjoined his congregation to

Look in his face and you would think that butter would not melt in his mouth; but as smooth as he looks, I will not wish you to follow him if you know him as much as I do . . . All is not gold that shines nor are all innocents that bear the face of children.<sup>9</sup>

Edward Hake, the puritan Mayor of Windsor, was later brief and to the point: 'Children are by nature evil, and being evil they are by the example of parents made worse.'<sup>10</sup> Despite a generally benign attitude to children the Comenian schoolmaster Hezekiah Woodward, citing Augustine in support, nevertheless warned that

as we observe Adam's ruins appearing betimes in the child, so we must be timely in the building against these ruins and repairing thereof . . . and so much may teach us what infancy is, and that those innocent years (as some have called them) are not innocent. They do show forth many ill and peccant humours lurking within, like poison in a chilled serpent, which must be looked unto betimes by keeping our eyes wakeful over the first three or four years.<sup>11</sup>

John Downname addressed himself direct to the child in his 'Prayer for Children' when he made his child recite:

I humbly confess that I am a most wretched sinner and altogether unworthy to be in the covenant of grace and salvation. For I was not only conceived and born in sin and corruption whereby thy glorious image was defaced in me, but I have added thereunto many actual sins.<sup>12</sup>

Nor was the point confined to the wide variety of 'godly books' then currently available. Thomas Wright, in his *Passions of the Mind in General* (1604) drew on humoral theory to insist that children 'lack the use of reason and are guided by an internal imagination, following nothing else but that pleaseth their senses; even after the same manner as brute beasts hate, love, fear and hope, so do children'.<sup>13</sup> The schoolmaster Thomas Granger, in his 'Epistle to the Reader' in which he sets out his 'Generall Theorike or True Grounds of Teaching', went into more detail:

children are phantastical and full of imaginations, their understandings weak, their apprehensions confused, and reason imperfect, and because their blood is hot and boiling, they are fickle and restless, minding nothing but varieties and novelties.<sup>14</sup>

It is against such a background that any consideration of women, their nature and nurture, has to be set. Without doubt, women in the early modern period 'enjoyed' (as we say nowadays) 'a bad press'. In much of the literature they not only shared with men the stigma of being 'born in sin', but they were additionally and crucially the direct descendants of Eve, the initiator, as it was claimed, of the events which led to the banishment from Paradise. A commonplace feature of most discussions about the nature of women, therefore, would be its starting point, Eve-woman the seducer, and its proof-text, the story of the Fall as told in Genesis, Chapter 3, repeated in 1 Timothy 2.13–14 and usually glossed as the fall of Adam at the hands of Eve. At the same time, however, woman was described as 'the weaker vessel', the comparative adjective of which should remind us that for the most part the debate about the nature of women was determined by reference to the nature of men, a procedure as common at the end of our period as at its beginning. The words of the Elizabethan Homily 'Of the State of Matrimony', 'for the woman is a weak creature, not endued with like strength and constancy of mind', are echoed a hundred years later, for example, in Richard Baxter's *Christian Directory*:

It is no small patience which the natural imbecility of the female sex requireth you to prepare. Except it be very few that are patient and man-like, women are commonly of potent fantasies, and tender, passionate, impatient spirits easily cast into anger or jealousy or discontent, and of weak understandings and therefore unable to reform themselves. They are betwixt man and child. Some few have more of the man, and many more of the child.<sup>15</sup>

Commonly, too, the ambiguity of the adjective 'weaker' was conveniently ignored by those who wished to present a misogynist point of view, though the literature of misogyny was far from homogeneous in its treatment of the matter. On the one hand, women were regarded as objects of ridicule, derision or contempt. They were by nature idle, garrulous chatterers, brainless, indiscreet gossips, unable to keep a secret; they were querulous, wayward, prodigal, capricious, obstinate, contrary and contentious. In one sense, then, their 'weakness' could be dismissed as of no great importance, as a mere inconvenience. As Zanthia complains in Marston's *The Wonder of Women* (1606):

We things call'd women [are] only made for show  
And pleasure, created to bear children  
And play at shuttlecock<sup>16</sup>



In another, more reflective sense, however, their 'weakness' was a matter of concern, something to be warned against. Idleness, for example, meant the neglect of that traditional charge to 'keep' the goods that it had been the responsibility of the husband to 'gather', a neglect of the role of the 'good-wife', the 'huswyf', etc. Proverbs 31 provided the appropriate proof-text for treatise and sermon, with Aristotelian dictum thrown in for good measure.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, idleness and garrulity in a woman inevitably led to gossip, which would endanger the secrets of her husband's trade or office, his 'misterie'. 'Trust a woman? Never! Never!' exclaimed Flamineo in John Webster's *White Devil* (1612), and Portia's agonised asides in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* would have struck a chord in many members of the Shakespearean audience:

Constancy, be strong upon my side!  
Set a huge mountain 'tween my heart and tongue!  
How hard it is for woman to keep counsel!

and later

. . . . . Ay me! how weak a thing  
The heart of woman is!

Sir John Harrington, on the other hand, congratulated his wife Mary on

thy good silence . . . for thanks to the sweet god of silence thy lips do not  
wanton out of discretion's path, like the many gossiping dames we could  
name who lose their husband's fast hold on good friends rather than  
hold fast on their own tongues.<sup>18</sup>

In the same way, 'inconstancy' as an aspect of the condition 'weaker' was treated not only at a relatively frivolous level – forever changing her mind as to the best colour for her dress – but also as an exemplification of the inconstant love, leading to cuckoldry, which was treated as a subject for bawdy humour, and adultery, which was certainly not regarded in the same lighthearted way.

Another aspect of a woman's nature, her propensity for 'contention' – treated as a matter for humour in John Heywood's collections of epigrams (1566) or in Anthony Copley's patently chauvinist *Wits, Fits and Fancies* (1595) – was for others of much greater significance, potent of danger not derision, and certainly nothing to be scoffed at, for it symbolised that disturbance of harmony and concord which was considered essential not only to the well-being of personal relationships but also to the stability of

family and commonwealth. Richard Hooker, for example, characterised it as a general social and political ill.<sup>19</sup> Shrewish wives abound in the literature – Noah's wife, Socrates' Zantippe, Aristotle's Phyllis, Chaucer's Wife of Bath are all recalled in the early modern period as exemplars, from *A C Mery Talys* (1526), Erasmus' pert Maria in his Colloquy 'Courtship' and the story in *Pasquil's Jests* (1604), taken from Poggio, of the husband who went upstream in search of his drowned wife because in life she had been so contrary, to their many counterparts in Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, as for example in Leonato's warning to Beatrice, 'By my troth, niece, thou wilt never get thee a husband if thou be so shrewd [shrewish] of tongue', and Matteo's comment in Thomas Dekker's *II The Honest Whore* (1630), 'There's no music when a woman is in the consort.'<sup>20</sup>

In all these characterisations of a woman's nature it was her patent lack of the male's ability to reason which made her in some sense sub-human when contrasted with her male counterpart. When Julia, discussing her choice of various suitors with Lucetta, her waiting woman, in Shakespeare's *Two Gentleman of Verona*, is asked 'Your reason?', she replies 'I have no other but a woman's reason. I think him so because I think him so.' The same response is made by Middleton's Violetta in *Blurt Master Constable*: 'I have a woman's response. I will not dance because I will not dance.'<sup>21</sup> When women presented a petition to the House of Commons in April 1649 they were told by the Sergeant-at-Arms that

the matter you petition about is of a higher concernment than you understand; that the House gave an answer to your husbands; and that therefore you are desired to go home and look after your own business and meddle with your housewifery.<sup>22</sup>

More threateningly, however, there appeared to be an easy transition from chattering scold to shrewish virago – and thence to fearsomely dangerous witch. When men came to portray women as scold, shrew, virago and witch they were coming close to expressing, if not overtly acknowledging, their basic apprehension of the powers of women. Edmund Tilney warned his readers to beware of the 'masterful shrew'. William Whately claimed that 'if a husband hath made himself an underling to his wife' he would at the same time have contributed to the production of a 'misshapen house'. Discussing the duties of wives in his *Of Domesticall Duties*, William Gouge stressed that 'if the fear of God possess not their hearts, though they be the weaker vessel, [they] do oft make their husbands plain vassals to them'.<sup>23</sup>

In each of these cases, and there were many more, 'weaker' seems not to be the appropriate adjective. When Hamlet exclaimed 'Frailty, thy name is woman'

he was referring not to that ‘tenderness, soft and mild with a kind of womanly sweetness’ that Castiglione had considered so desirable, nor even to ‘this fair defect of nature’ which Milton referred to in *Paradise Lost*, but to the other end of the continuum, to woman as sexual predator.<sup>24</sup> Woman’s ‘fervency’ was a commonplace of misogynist literature and dramatic personification. Lear’s embittered tirade against Regan was a typical characterisation, to be seen also in Isabella in Marston’s *The Insatiate Countess* and in Roxena in Middleton’s *Hengist King of Kent*.<sup>25</sup> In this portrayal of woman as lustful, lascivious seducer, what was at the same time being exemplified was her capacity for deceit for ends other than sexual satisfaction, using her seductive powers to gain ascendancy over an individual male or over a state which he alone should rule. She was thus wilfully ignoring the allegedly ‘natural’ passivity of woman, and in so doing usurping the ‘active’ role of man.

Alternatively, if a woman presumed to become more man-like by acquiring a learned education she might still be derided as what the eighteenth century came to call a ‘blue-stocking’. Jonson, for example, constantly ridiculed such women in his plays as ‘collegiate ladies’ and Herrick was not unusual in praying for an ‘unlearned’ wife.<sup>26</sup> The ‘merry’ riposte in Heywood’s *Gunaikieion* (1624):

I desire me to have a woman to be my wife that shall have no more tongue to answer me to a question than yea or nay; or to have more wit than to distinguish her husband’s bed from another man’s<sup>27</sup>

was merely a commonplace which ‘Jane Anger’ had already identified in her *Jane Angers Protection Against Women* (1589). Moreover, if she were seen to be acting in an independent fashion, a woman’s behaviour could easily be deplored as (literally) ‘monstrous’ or ‘Amazonian’. Lady Macbeth’s ‘unsex me here’ and Goneril’s ‘I must change arms at home, and give the distaff into my husband’s hands’ are echoed throughout the literature, dramatic or otherwise, with polemicists citing Medea, Delilah, Jezebel and Joan of Arc (amongst other exemplars) to buttress their case.<sup>28</sup> When Middleton’s Follywit insisted ‘’Tis an Amazonian time’ he was at the same time commenting on what was regarded as a currently dangerous social phenomenon – the number of itinerant and therefore uncontrolled women, such as the Southampton women who, in 1580, were seen to ‘keep themselves out of service and work for themselves in divers men’s houses [and] take chambers and so live by themselves masterless’.<sup>29</sup> The literature had a long line of these dangerously independent women – Long Meg of Westminster, Mary Ambree, Mary Frith (alias Moll Cutpurse in Middleton’s *Roaring Girl*), and Margarita in Beaumont and Fletcher’s *Rule a Wife and Have a Wife* who warned Leon:

You must not look to be my Master Sir,  
Nor talk i' th' house as though you wore the breeches.<sup>30</sup>

Of course, when it suited, as in the case of Queen Elizabeth, it was considered perfectly proper to praise her man-like qualities of bravery, leadership, etc., as she was praised, for example, in her coronation procession,<sup>31</sup> and to liken her to Deborah, victor over the Canaanites and arbiter of disputes among the Israelites, or to Judith, the Apocryphal deliverer of the Jews from the besieging Holophernes. Woodcuts and engravings too, especially after the defeat of the Armada, showed her armoured and visually asserting that she really did have all the man-like qualities that she claimed to have in the speech attributed to her at Tilbury in 1588.<sup>32</sup> In this way, the whole Gloriana literature effectively turned misogyny on its head – but only for a queen, and a particular queen at that. Spenser was not alone in being careful to make the distinction:

But virtuous women wisely understood  
That they were born to base humility  
Unless the heavens them lift to lawful sovereignty.<sup>33</sup>

At an apparently less damnable level, women's 'weakness', as expressed in their proclivity for the use of cosmetics and gaudy expensive apparel, was often ridiculed, by women themselves in Erasmus' colloquy 'The Lower House or The Council of Women', but more typically by men, as in Gentian Hervet's translation *Xenophons Treatise of Household* (1534), or in the multi-authored *Eastward Ho* (1605). Here, the goldsmith's daughters aimed to be 'ladyfied forsooth: and to be attir'd just to court-cut, and long tayle'.<sup>34</sup> But a woman's vanity was also condemned in other terms and on other grounds. Such behaviour was seen not only as a costly misuse of time which could be better spent in Bible-reading and prayer but also, more importantly, as an attempt to appear what she was not. Xenophon had argued the case at a personal level, but Thomas Becon treated the matter as having more general import: 'Neither ought any woman to go apparelled otherwise than their degree and state required', a point later reinforced in its proscription in the Homily 'Against Excess of Apparel', as well as in numerous Proclamations (which were also directed against men), whose frequency nevertheless points to their relative inadequacy in practice.<sup>35</sup> All such proscriptions were based on a firm and unbending view as to the nature of vocation and status in society, which alone, it was claimed, would prevent the breakdown of 'natural' social gradations by aspirations inappropriate to one's God-given place in society, which is 'that state of life into which it shall please God to call me', as the Primer in 1549 Book of Common Prayer put it.<sup>36</sup>

But commonplace as these views were they do not provide a complete picture of early modern attitudes and beliefs about the nature of children and women. Those who wished to substitute a more naturalistic optimism for the traditional Christian pessimism about the nature of the child, whilst at the same time preserving a theological orthodoxy, preferred to use proof-texts taken from the New Testament, such as Mark 10.14: 'Suffer little children to come unto me and forbid them not, for of such is the kingdom of God', or Matthew 18.13: 'except ye be converted and become as little children, ye shall not enter the kingdom of heaven'. Moreover, in their determination to counter the misogynists' reliance on a particular interpretation of the Eve myth as told in Genesis 3.1, the defenders preferred to cite the pre-Lapsarian nature of woman, using Genesis 1.27, in which Adam and Eve together are regarded as the crown of the creation myth: 'So God created man in His own image, in the image of God created He him; male and female created He them.' This still required a response to the Pauline claim that Adam's chronological primacy gave him superiority over Eve. Here it became necessary to remind readers (and of course listeners) that Eve was created from Adam's *side*, not his foot. Both Augustine and Aquinas had drawn attention to the symbolic significance of the point (without of course infringing the superior status of the male over the female).<sup>37</sup>

No one doubted women's spiritual equality with men. Others went further than this, however, to claim against all misogynist tradition that the male had no monopoly of that quality which distinguished man from beast, his reason. Cornelia, the leader of Erasmus' group of women discussing the setting up of an 'Assembly or Parliament of Women', complained at the outset that 'men treat us virtually as amusements and scarcely think us deserving of the name of human'. George Chapman's Dowsecer put it another way:

But to admire them as our gallants do,  
O what an eye she hath, O dainty hand,  
Rare foot and leg, and leave the mind respectless,  
This is a plague, that in both men and women  
Makes such a pollution of our earthly being.<sup>38</sup>

Vives, however, citing Xenophon in support, asserted that 'The woman's wit is not less apt to all things than the man is.' Sir Thomas More, writing in 1518 to his daughter's tutor, William Gonell, was unequivocal in the matter:

Nor do I think that the harvest is much affected  
whether it is a man or a woman who does the sowing.

They both have the name of human being whose nature reason differentiates from that of the beasts; both, I say, are equally suited for the knowledge of learning by which reason is cultivated.<sup>39</sup>

Sir Thomas Elyot's *Candidus*, arguing in Socratic fashion on behalf of women, soundly trounces his misogynist opponent, Caninus, who is forced to conclude: 'I see well enough that women being well and virtuously brought up, do not only with men participate in reason but some also in fidelity and constancy be equal unto them.' Montaigne echoed the humanist position when he asserted 'I say that both male and female are cast in the same mould; except for education and custom the difference is not great between them.'<sup>40</sup> The puritan Roger Carr continued the theme: 'Most true it is that women are as men, reasonable creatures, and have flexible wits both to good and evil, the which with use, direction and good counsel may be altered and turned.' Nor was the view particular to Protestants. The Jesuit, Henry Garnett, told his female followers 'your husbands over your soul have no authority, and over your bodies but limited power'. William Austin put it most comprehensively:

In the sex is all the difference, which is but only in the body. For she hath the same reasonable soul, and in that there are neither hees nor shees; neither excellency nor superiority; she hath the same soul, the same mind, the same understanding, and tends the same end of eternal salvation that he doth, in which there is no exception.<sup>41</sup>

Occasionally it was claimed that in some respects women were to be regarded as superior to men. 'Jane Anger', for example, argued the case for women on two fronts, pointing out that 'Adam was moulded out of the dusty clay of the earth; she was framed out of the purified body of man.' William Austin went further, by noting that women were the *last* on earth to be created: 'from minerals, vegetables, birds, beasts, man. Every work being still more perfect of all, he rested.' Anthony Gibson argued from current humoral theory that

as women are much more moist than men . . . they are therefore not like men in the public theatre the subject of very tragical faults . . . The nature of a woman being inclined to sadness discovers wisdom, makes her prudent and apprehensive; whereas men are commonly rash and unruly, because divers appetites transport them to many frivolous and fleeting considerations, which might fault you shall find few women, or none at all infected with.

Richard Braithwait made the same point in more general terms:

And if that ancient philosophical maxim hold good: 'That the temperature of the soul follows the temperature of the body' we must necessarily conclude that as their outward temperature and composure is more delicate, so their inward affections must be more purely refined. No violent passion so predominant which their mild temper cannot moderate.<sup>42</sup>

The superiority of women was also urged by reference to classical and biblical stories. The patient and long-suffering Griselda, for example, was constantly cited, from Chaucer, Petrarch and Boccaccio onwards, when it came to a search for models of Christian behaviour.<sup>43</sup> Lucretia, Penelope and others were similarly evidenced. From the Bible Susannah figured largely as an exemplar,<sup>44</sup> alongside Mary Magdalen, Esther, Sarah, Ruth, Abigail, and of course, even in Protestant circles, Mary, the mother of Jesus, cited for example by Thomas Becon, in his *New Catechisme*. The dramatic literature, too, provided examples of women whose actions showed them to be eminently more rational in their behaviour than their menfolk – Hermione, Paulina and Perdita in Shakespeare's *Winter's Tale* and Rosalind, Viola and Portia in other plays, as also Fletcher's eponymous heroine in *Bonducca* and Evadne in Beaumont and Fletcher's *The Maid's Tragedy*.

By the mid-seventeenth century claims on behalf of women, based on a rejection of traditional views about the 'weakness' of their nature, were becoming increasingly evident. Texts from France such as Jacques de Bosc's *L'Honneste Femme* (1632) and Pierre le Moyne's *La Gall rie des Femmes Fortes* (1647) were translated into English, as later were Poulain de la Barr's *De L'Egalite des Deux Sexes* (1673), Madeleine de Scud ry's *Conversations Nouvelles sur Divers Sujets* (1686) and F nelon's *De L'Education des Filles* (1687).<sup>45</sup> In the second half of the century, too, English women writers produced their own texts, with the prolific Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, leading the way with her *Philosophical and Physical Opinions* (1655) and *The World's Olio* (1655), to be followed by Bathsua Makin's *An Essay to Revive the Ancient Education of Gentlemen in Religion, Manners, Arts and Tongues* (1673), Hannah Woolley's *The Gentlewomans Companion* (1675), Mary Astell's *A Serious Proposal for the Ladies* (1694), Lady Mary Chudleigh's *The Ladies' Defence* (1701), and other lesser writers. Moreover, such women continued to be supported by their male counterparts, from Abraham Darcie, *The Honour of Ladies* (1622), and Edward Fleetwood, *The Glory of Women* (1652), to George Savile, William Walsh and Daniel Defoe. Even the periodical press joined in, with the *Athenian Mercury*, for example, discussing in 1691 'Whether or not it is proper for a woman to be learned' and concluding:

On the whole since they have as noble souls as we, a finer genius and generally quicker apprehensions, we see no reason why women should not be learned now as well as Madam Philips, van Schurmann and others have formerly been.<sup>46</sup>

For the most part, the word 'nature' was taken to imply something innate, inherent, unchanging – but in one degree or another, since few argued that it was unchangeable. As many recognised, the difficulty lay in maintaining any change in a woman's (or a man's) nature that might have been wrought by 'nurture'. Whatever position was taken on the Mary–Eve continuum, there nevertheless remained the possibility of regeneration, which in turn raised the issues of when, how, by whom, etc., that is the educational or more strictly the pedagogical problem of 'nurture' as a means of either reinforcing or changing 'nature'.

'Nurture', of course, meant different things to different people. For some it was merely a teaching and learning process whose purpose was to learn how to be a Christian in all aspects of life, in accordance with the current orthodoxy, statutorily ordained. Others went further than this, and whilst acknowledging that the post-Lapsarian Christian could be saved only by God's grace, nevertheless insisted that the aim of the process was to learn *why* a Christian should live her life in that way. Nurture could thus help a Christian to recognise this and so to order her life and her relations with other Christians in family, parish and state that, with a repentant heart, she could be embraced by God's forgiveness, and at the end achieve that salvation which every Christian sought. The very existence of catechisms of all kinds for all sorts and all denominations, together with the constant and repeated exhortations to catechise and be catechised in order to 'seek to enter the pathway to salvation',<sup>47</sup> provides ample evidence of this. Even so, the place of reason in nurture had a considerably limited scope. It rarely meant following the argument, in strictly logical fashion, wherever it led and for the most part, as we have seen, women were considered to be especially limited in the matter, since what was regarded as their 'natural' inferiority meant they could have their argument dismissed, not because it was illogical or misinformed, but because it had been put forward by a woman. As Milton has Delilah acknowledge in *Samson Agonistes*:

In argument with men, a woman ever  
Goes by the worse, whatever be her course.<sup>48</sup>

Even so, the literature of the period is full of biological, and more particularly



horticultural, metaphors which stressed not only the need for but also the possibilities of nurture. The child becomes the soil to be tilled or the green twig to be bent, the teacher is the wise gardener, clearing stony ground, tilling the soil, sowing the seed, grafting and pruning the tree, striking roots, each of the metaphors emphasising the possibilities of nurture in the growth and development of the child – of course, always in preferred ways and directions. Even more potent was the *tabula rasa* metaphor, through which the likening of a child at birth to a piece of wax or clay signalled the possibility of nurture for virtuous behaviour and the avoidance of ‘misshapen’ members of the commonwealth.<sup>49</sup> By emphasising not only the blankness but also the malleability of the material, writers were able to prescribe a much more positive approach to nurture, in contradistinction to the curbing tendency of their opponents, with whom the bridle metaphor predominated. As William Gouge put it, ‘There is necessity that children be taught piety, because they are not born but made Christians.’ At the same time, the metaphor was used to emphasise the need for the earliest possible starting of a child’s education, long before entry in to some kind of formal ‘schooling’, which, since the vast majority of children would not enter school, reinforced the message of parental responsibility for nurture.<sup>50</sup>

Alongside such metaphors and continuing to be quoted throughout the period was the story, culled from the much-translated and plagiarised Plutarch (though originally told by Lycurgus, the fourth-century BC Attic Orator), of the two young dogs, one pure-bred and trained in the kitchen, the other a mongrel and trained in the field. When food was presented the pure-bred dog went straight to it, whilst the mongrel went off after game in the field – not the ‘controlled experiment’ of the twentieth-century psychologists but a story whose lively simplicity was made the more persuasively effective by its constant repetition in all kinds of text over a long period of time. It was used by Erasmus who drew the moral from it that ‘while nature is strong, education is more powerful still’,<sup>51</sup> a conclusion which is repeated when the story is retold in the several translations of Plutarch produced during the early modern period, or whenever an author needed to make the point as, for example, in Peter de la Primaudaye’s *The French Academie* (1586), Richard Braithwait’s *English Gentleman* (1630), and Matthew Griffith’s *Bethel or a Forme for Families* (1633).<sup>52</sup>

In following through the weaker vessel metaphor, no one argued that nurture would be a complete waste of time; even the most pessimistic view of human nature believed it to be a duty to attempt the curbing process. Some indeed argued that a woman was in need of *more* not less education precisely because of her ‘weakness’. Others, however, went beyond this essentially prophylactic view of education to insist on the need to *foster* a girl’s Mary-like potentialities.

This humanist insistence on the influence of nurture on nature was early applied to the education of girls by Leonardo Bruni in his short piece *De Studiis et Literis* (c.1405),<sup>53</sup> which he wrote for the benefit of Baptista, the younger daughter of Antonio, Count of Urbino, a view which was repeated in the writings of Vives and More at the beginning of our period. But it was Richard Mulcaster, the successful Master of two leading London boys' schools, who systematically applied the argument, in the long chapter on girls' education which he included in his text *Positions* (1581). In it he likened parents who would not educate their daughters to those who forbade their children to use their left hands:

nature has given them abilities to prove excellent in their kind [he claimed] . . . that naturally they are so richly endowed, all philosophy is full, no divinity denies . . . young maidens deserve the train, because they that have treasure bestowed them by nature to be bettered in them by nurture . . . That young maidens can learn, nature doth give them, and that they have learned, our experience doth teach us.

He went on to give a list of classical exemplars followed by 'our most worthy princess . . . for whose excellent knowledge and learning we have most cause to rejoice'.<sup>54</sup>

Yet, even if the possibility of nurture was acknowledged by some, there still remained the question of whether it was desirable. Some, of course, doubted its efficacy, as Mulcaster noted: 'But some Timon will say, what should women do with learning? Such a churlish caper will never pick out the best, but be always ready to blame the worst.'<sup>55</sup> When Francis Bacon, for example, wrote in his essay 'Of Nature in Men' that 'Nature is often hidden, sometimes overcome, seldom extinguished' he was clearly referring in his title to males (in the plural) and not to generic 'man', though this is implied in the rest of the essay. Yet when he comes to exemplify his argument he takes Aesop's fable of the cat who, having been turned into a woman, 'sat very demurely, at the board's end, till a mouse ran before her'.<sup>56</sup> The initial aphorism would have been commonplace in Bacon's day, but Aesop's tale and its application to women would also have been readily accepted. The downfall of Lady Anne Frankford in Thomas Heywood's *A Woman Killed with Kindness* (1607) would have been taken by some at least of Heywood's audience as providing an example of a well-born, well-educated and well-beloved wife reverting to the alleged type. The behaviour of Tamyra in Chapman's *Bussy D'Ambois* (1607) would have produced a similar response. Sir Miles Sandys made the same point directly in his *Prima Pars Parvi Opuscula* (1634) when he asserted 'To make them scholars were frivolous . . . learning in a woman is like a sundial in

a grave'. James I, on being told of a young woman's learning, acidly asked 'But can she spin?' Even that affectionate husband Sir John Harrington expressed the same sentiment in his epigrammatic poem 'Of Women Learned in the Tongues':

You wish me to a wife, fair, rich and young,  
That had the Latin, French and Spanish tongue.  
I thanked, and told you I desired none such,  
And said, One language may be tongue too much.  
Then love I not the learned? Yes, as my life;  
A learned mistress, not a learned wife.<sup>57</sup>

Alexander Niccoles, offering 'certain precepts' in his *Discourse of Marriage and Wiving* (1615), advised a young man that he should 'make thy choice rather of a virtuous than a learned wife'.<sup>58</sup> Nor were such comments the preserve of the treatise writers. As the contemporary proverb put it, 'A learned wife seldom proves good.' Even the balladeers had something to say on the matter:

Their soaring thoughts to books advance,  
'Tis odds that may undo 'um,  
For ever since Dame Eve's mischance  
That villainous itch sticks to 'um.<sup>59</sup>

Elizabeth Jocelin, a caring mother anxious to do her best for her offspring, nevertheless warned her daughter to hide what knowledge she had rather than 'boast it', though a century later Lord Chesterfield offered the same advice to his son: 'Wear your learning like your watch in a private pocket; and do not merely pull it out and strike it merely to show you have one.'<sup>60</sup>

Those, then, who acknowledged the possibility, even desirability, of nurture nevertheless recommend only a limited and in the end limiting curriculum, one aimed at curbing the 'natural' tendencies of women as with a bridle, confining them to the limited sphere of the home, where once again they would carry out their 'natural' function in society. Vives had recognised the tendency early on: 'I perceive that learned women be suspected of many; as who sayth, the subtilty of learning should be a nourishment for the maliciousness of their nature',<sup>61</sup> before going on to deny the validity of the suspicion. But with some the attitude persisted. When Sir Ralph Verney heard in 1652 that his god-daughter 'Nancy' (Ann Denton) wished to learn Latin, Greek and Hebrew he gently tried to dissuade her: 'Good sweetheart be not so covetous; believe me, a Bible . . . and a good plain catechism in your mother tongue, being well