

# Mladá veda

## Young Science





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# THE ROLE OF THE COURTSHIP NOVELS IN THE FORMATION OF THE FEMALE IDENTITY IN THE CONTEXT OF THE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY WOMEN'S EMANCIPATION IN ENGLAND

ROMÁNY O DVORENÍ A FORMOVANIE ŽENSKEJ IDENTITY V KONTEXTE  
EMANCIPÁCIE ŽIEN V 18. STOROČÍ V ANGLICKU

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Autorka pôsobí ako externá doktorandka na Filozofickej fakulte Univerzity Komenského v Bratislave. Venuje sa literárnej vede a jej súčasný výskum sa zameriava na paralely medzi dielami anglickej spisovateľky Jane Austenovej a slovenských ženských autoriek 19. storočia.

## **Abstrakt**

Tento článok skúma vznik a vývoj románu o dvorení v Anglicku v osemnástom storočí. V kontexte spoločenských zmien a rastúceho feministického povedomia slúžil tento typ románu ako platforma pre ženy, aby preskúmali svoje poslanie a túžby v rámci obmedzujúcej patriarchálnej spoločnosti. Na základe skúmania spoločensko-historického pozadia kľúčových autoriek a ich diel článok analyzuje, ako sa tento žáner vyvíjal od idealizovaných romantických príbehov ku komplexnejším reflexiám ženských skúseností a ambícií. Zdôrazňuje najmä odvahu kľúčových autoriek, ako sú Frances Burneyová, Jane Austenová a Maria Edgeworthová, pri formovaní tohto subžáneru románu a prispievaní k pokračujúcemu diskurzu o právach a úlohách žien. V tomto príspevku sme došli k záveru, že román o dvorení bol významným nástrojom v pokračujúcom boji za posilnenie postavenia žien v spoločnosti.

**Kľúčové slová:** romány o dvorení, anglické autorky v 18. storočí, zobrazenie žien v literatúre, patriarchát a rodové roly, ženská identita

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## **Abstract**

This paper examines the emergence and evolution of the courtship novel in eighteenth-century England. Within the context of societal upheaval and growing feminist consciousness, the courtship novel served as a platform for women to explore their roles and wishes within the restraints of patriarchal society. By examining the socio-historical background, key authors and works, the paper analyses how the genre evolved from idealised romantic narratives to more complex reflections of women's experiences and ambitions. It particularly highlights the courage of pivotal female authors, such as Frances Burney, Jane Austen, and Maria Edgeworth, in shaping this subgenre and contributing to the ongoing discourse on women's rights and duties. This article concludes that the courtship novel served as a significant tool in the continuing struggle for female empowerment.

Key words: courtship novels, English eighteenth-century female writers, literary representation of women, patriarchy and gender roles, female identity

## **Introduction**

The turbulence of eighteenth-century England, marked by ceaseless societal changes, sparked discourses on various hot topics. These circumstances reflected in the artistic realms, particularly in literature. The Age of Enlightenment witnessed a significant shift in literary works, with books of philosophy, geography, history, travels, or botany giving way to the more attitudinal genre of the novel. This narrative form was on the rise, and among its subgenres, a particular one surfaced that played a crucial role for a part of the human population – the fair sex.

The overall switch in the mindfulness of the eighteenth-century English general public raised the essential but taboo question: what to do with women who started getting out of hand. It caught men by surprise and brought a lot of male-female tension. The then strictly patriarchal society starkly opposed these rising female voices and kept clinging to the stuffy rules and laws.<sup>2</sup> At this point, however, it was too late. The ladies and their strong opinions were all over the place. The process of feminine input into the lives of the English people had begun.

The move towards a new perceptiveness in society running throughout the whole country reflected in English fiction. New topics, such as the status of women and their outlook on life, occurred. This encouraged many new writers to enter into such discussions. There was a boom of women authors who wanted to have their say. A vast base of female readers arose from this situation as either buyers of books or subscribers to circulating libraries.<sup>3</sup> Women chose novel as their preferred genre because it had always been a platform where social problems and manners could be analysed the best. The primary concerns of these literary works

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<sup>2</sup> One such law was the 1753 Act for the Better Preventing of Clandestine Marriages introduced in Parliament by Lord Hardwicke. This act demanded the statutory ceremony of every marriage, effectively limiting women's freedom to choose their partners and control their own lives. It was a major setback for women's emancipation, as it reinforced the patriarchal control over marriage and further restricted women's agency.

<sup>3</sup> Circulating library was a book rental business mostly for the readers from middle- or upper-classes as only they were able to pay an annual or quarterly fee. Circulating libraries offered books to a larger number of the public who could not afford to buy many books. With the expansion of the customers, circulating libraries gained big volumes of diverse books, resulting in a massive increase in demand for the novels that very soon became one of the most stocked genres.

were women's claims to equality with men, the objection to their inferior status as human beings, and an urge to make independent decisions in the matter of marriage. The demand from female readers to engage in this debate became enormous, which soon resulted in the development of a new subcategory of a novel – the courtship novel.

### **The Social Inception of the Courtship Novel**

In light of the revolutionary social ideas of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, supported by Jean-Jacques Rousseau's "Man is born free", the elementary principle that every person, whether male or female, came to be viewed as an individual, had been clarified. Nonetheless, women "managed" to stay in the background of this theory, which somehow did not take them into account.<sup>4</sup> Yet, this new conception of individual rights created opportunities for self-conscious women to implement their bold plans to improve their social rank. They stepped out of anonymity and commenced the change of perception of them to rational human beings able to think.<sup>5</sup> Since women had not had access to the academic education that their male counterparts received, they were unable to have an influence on political, economic or other essential grounds; just yet. What they could influence, though, was everyday life in their immediate surrounds. This new understanding of acquired power formed a new comprehension of the spousal partnership. There was an apparent move from a marriage of convenience carried out only by condition of parental consent towards a more equal relationship between wife and husband. The idea of a companionate marriage meant a fundamental alteration of women's self-perception in this institution and was so ground-breaking that in order to represent these new roles, an advanced literary form was called for. The novel of courtship was, therefore, the best medium for conveying the concerns of the weaker sex with regards to the marriage and everything that preceded it. Contrary to the contemporary narrative forms, in the centre of this novel subgenre, there is a woman who is no longer content in her role as a victim in male-female relationships and grows to become a heroine aware of her own qualities as a valuable equal to her partner. The courtship novels shared a common desire of an independent woman who, with her own rational choice of action, achieves an ultimate improvement of her life conditions.

### **The Aim of the Courtship Novels**

The courtship novels, written chiefly by women and aimed at women, thrived in the atmosphere of the eighteenth century that favoured all women's endeavours. The predominant topic included a reader's observation of a young woman's debut up to entering the marriage. The main aim was to stress this timeline as the most important chapter in the eighteenth-century

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<sup>4</sup> In his *Emile, or On Education* (1762), Jean-Jacques Rousseau proposed innovative changes in education, but what he really meant were changes in male education. When it came to women, he proclaimed their "fashionable" education to focus on obedience to men or else on being a source of enjoyment for them.

<sup>5</sup> At that time, there was a prevailing notion that women, similar to animals, might be creatures with very little brain capabilities. Mary Wollstonecraft's book of feminist philosophy, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), endorses this presumption as in this book, we can find statements such as: "should their [women's; note ours] rationality be proved [...] if they [women; note ours] be really capable of acting like rational creatures" (Wollstonecraft, 2020, pp. 70-71). One thing is certain – in those times "Women had [...] been commonly consigned to a special consideration with slaves, the unlettered and lunatics" (Kirkham, 1997, pp. 4-5).

girl's life. The story usually offered a sequence of events starting with the young lady's first appearance in society, her courtship, difficulties that came with occurrences connected with all these circumstances and leading to (in most cases) a happily ever after in the end. Moreover, all this, of course, looked at from a woman's point of view. This is why we have to look at these types of novels separately from standard novels – the courtship novels feminized the novel genre and were adjusted to the emancipated purposes of those times. They created a space of domestic setting where women could, to the extent tolerated by social rules, present their perspectives on gender politics.

These books carried a very specific message that their objectors had not noticed for a long time. They served as an opposition to conduct books<sup>6</sup> that were written exclusively by men and were full of repressive opinions that placed women at a disadvantage. In this sense, courtship novels were didactic, containing incipient feminist ideas, especially about marriage and female education. Women did not need another man to give them advices; they wanted to see that many other women shared the same emotions and beliefs on self-definition.

### **Courtship Novel as a Tool for Female Empowerment in Eighteenth-Century England**

Women were fully aware of the fact that if they wanted to be taken seriously by men, they needed to work extremely hard to prove themselves. In those times, women's careers were limited to a few professions, such as actresses or teachers; the latter one, however praiseworthy, was badly paid and provided little respect to its representative. There was also literary work, but it supplied an unstable income, so the only way for an ordinary woman to feel secure was in matrimony. One might say that it was a tough time for the fair sex as, in those days, the ladies were more conscious of their disadvantages than they had ever been. They longed to become equals with men; they believed that this was the right time to present their best selves, but at the same time, they were fully aware that the unsystematic education and constraints that men pressed upon them were holding them back. In the courtship novels, these issues were exemplified by the heroines. Frances Burney's novels *Evelina, or, The History of a Young Lady's Entrance into the World* (1778), *Cecilia, or, Memoirs of an Heiress* (1782) and *Camilla, A Picture of Youth* (1796) were written in this spirit, and these books "raise serious questions about contemporary attitudes to men, women and marriage, even though the solutions adopted are hardly rebellious" (Kirkham, 1997, p. 35). Burney's heroines are indeed run away with emotions and sensibility, but it actually shows that women struggled between the awakening of their new "selves" and their obligations to society. At the same time, they were no longer willing to accept male commodification and went to great lengths to gradually weaken the power that their parents, guardians or suitors had over them. Even though Frances Burney "was without

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<sup>6</sup> Conduct books intended for women gave strong recommendations on appropriate behaviour and good manners. They served as modern guides to a proper demeanour and social etiquette in various situations. These conduct "manuals" typically contained advices on how to be subservient to a husband and silently bear his imperfections, how to raise children, how to avoid a company of people who could potentially damage one's reputation, how to restrain talking in public and showing any knowledge of the particular subject of discussion as it was considered unbecoming, etc. Women were expected to follow these instructions to retain and cultivate their modesty and virtue. Among the most popular conduct books rank James Fordyce's *Sermons to Young Women* (1766), John Gregory's *A Father's Legacy to His Daughters* (1774), or Thomas Gisborne's *An Enquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex* (1797).



the insight of Richardson, without the breadth and sanity of Fielding; she did not equal Defoe in his extraordinary capacity for creating the illusion of a world of solid objects” (Gillie, 1991, p. 80), still, her courtship novels were extremely popular among the readers. These books were not those of strong feminist critiques, but in them, we can trace the beginnings of literary emancipation that paved the way for later female authors like Jane Austen.

On the contrary to Burney’s conservative female characters who were the “embodiments of virtue” (Bradbrook, 1967, p. 110), there began to appear the heroines who were imperfect, but they brought fresh air to the rigid depiction of female characters. Heroines like Jane Austen’s Emma in *Emma* (1815) or Elizabeth Inchbald’s Miss Milner in *A Simple Story* (1791) are more confident than the preceding central female characters; they are not afraid to say whatever they please, even if it is not always appropriate and it shocks people around them. From then on, these heroines were set as paragons for what should be apprehended as the standard women characters. A couple of examples from the group of vigorous women who wrote a more abrasive diction indicate the many different directions women’s thoughts were heading at the time. Mary Ann Hanway’s *Ellinor, or, The World as It Is* (1798) discusses the harmful effect poor education has upon women’s mental as well as physical health, and thus are incompetent to support themselves and must lean on a man. An interesting topic is observed in Amelia Opie’s *Adeline Mowbray; or, The Mother and Daughter* (1804), where the main protagonist, Adeline, pays a high price for making a decision to never marry. Throughout the whole novel, this anti-marriage attitude makes Adeline’s life miserable, and in the end, she is forced to change her mind, as no one would withstand the abuse she continuously received from society.

### **Bestsellers or Failures? Courtship Novel Controversy and its Literary Varieties as a Result**

Nonetheless, there were voices from the male side too, that supported this activism. Daniel Defoe presented his endorsement by writing, “I have often thought of it as one of the most barbarous customs in the world, that we deny the advantages of learning to women” (Gillie, 1991, p. 98). Open-minded writer Samuel Richardson listened to his well-educated female friends urging him to write on this subject, which resulted in his publishing of a famous epistolary novel, *The History of Sir Charles Grandison* (1753-54). This book deals with the issues of educational reform that subsequently led to situating women at the same level as their male counterparts, “enabling companionate relationships between wives and husbands” (Green, 1991, p. 95). An interesting element of a male character defending women’s rights to affectionate marriage can be seen in Frances Moore Brooke’s *The History of Emily Montague* (1769). The fact that a man proposes the concept of equality is perceived as less radical, which gives Brooke a chance to take this “audacious” statement farther than it might have initially been possible had it been pronounced by a woman.

In the second half of the eighteenth century, there started to be a noticeable increase in not only courtship novels but also sentimental and gothic novels. These books became extremely popular and flooded personal collections and shelves of circulating libraries. The picture from Isaac Cruikshank *The Circulating Library* (Picture 1) proves how frequently these books were borrowed. The selves for books on voyages & travels, plays, history books and

sermons seem to be hardly rented, whereas novels, romances and tales sections are almost empty. In addition, we can see that the visitors of the circulating library are three women – which demonstrates how much the number of female subscribers enlarged during this period.



Picture 1 – CRUIKSHANK, Isaac: The Circulating Library  
Source: The Trustees of the British Museum  
London: Laurie & Whittle, 1804  
Museum number: 1948,0214.689

This, of course, was not left unnoticed. In general, the novel as a genre did not have a good reputation, with Fielding's *The History of Tom Jones, A Foundling* (1749) and Richardson's *Pamela, or, Virtue Rewarded* (1740) startling the public with their controversial content.<sup>7</sup> Many critics argued that courtship novels may have a negative impact on impressionable, young female readers, influencing their overly romantic and unrealistic expectations of courtship, men, and marriage. The conservatives feared that believing in the excessive emotional notions of these subjects would lead to disappointments in married life when a woman might have been trapped in a miserable marriage due to the lack of information about a spouse before having entered the marriage; or result in running away with the first tolerable suitor without properly ascertaining his real intentions. This might have potentially ruined a woman's reputation as an

<sup>7</sup> Among other things *Tom Jones* covered topics such as prostitution or promiscuity and in *Pamela* Richardson included debauchery and introduced a relatively new topic into the literature – domestic violence.



eligible match in her future marriage as back then, such an elopement was considered to be a scandalous act. Therefore, in case the foolish young girls were in want of reading such fiction of “questionable moral content” and were incapable of observing serious matters, it was advised that reading these novels should be done solely under adult supervision. The misgivings of these affairs resulted in a change of diction of certain novelists. Their heroines started to act as drama queens and behaved ridiculously in ordinary situations. The effect of this mockery was supposed to expose these characters in view of how false ideas found in romantic books can damage the sensible perception of reality. *The Female Quixote, or, The Adventures of Arabella* (1752) by Charlotte Lennox entangles the female quixote in an imaginary distorted construct where she sees herself as a romantic heroine who “expects that every eligible man will declare himself her lover, that every letter she receives must be a *billet doux*, and that frequent plots will be laid for her abduction” (Green, 1991, p. 48). Lennox intends to demystify the marriage, to understand what lies behind the common notion of it when reflecting on the genuine suitable relationship between the main character and her suitor at the end of the novel when the heroine finally accepts the difference between the plot in the books she had read and the actual real-world scenarios.

As a result, at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the courtship novel modified itself into a didactic book on polite manners, moral principles and marital advices. It served as some kind of step-by-step guide for marriageable women and went through the whole process of courtship and marriage with them. The didactic material from conduct books was wilfully incorporated into these courtship novels. Throughout the plotline, the authors kept emphasizing the importance of proper education and practice of reasoning; however at the same time, their aim was not to destroy the core of the courtship novels – the romantic concept of the story. Based on this, a new type of heroine starts to emerge as early as in the middle of the eighteenth century. In *The Fortunate Foundlings* (1744), the author Eliza Haywood outlines “to her readers to identify with the relatively new position her heroine takes and to enjoy a corresponding liberation from outdated notions about woman’s submissive role in courtship” (Green, 1991, p. 27). The main character, Louisa, finds herself in a predicament when a pressure is put on her to choose between an obligation to marry her guardian as a gratitude for taking care of her during her childhood or pursuing her own love match. The choice of the latter proves to be a harder one as it is so unusual in those days that it is met with unacceptance from the men around her. The situation Louisa finds herself in is worsened by the fact that because she had fled her guardian’s house, she needs to work to make ends meet. Following long contemplations, Louisa makes a decision to leave her guardian even though she puts herself at great risk of not making it on her own. After this, Haywood lets Louisa experience various self-learning hardships to be relieved by her true love. The most important message here is the process of Louisa’s inexplicable urge for her self-definition, which cannot be supported by anyone in her proximity as nobody shares the same views on this subject. The reader should, however, learn another important thing: freeing oneself from the shackles of restrictions that society expects women to follow is attainable. In her later courtship novel *The History of Jemmy and Jenny Jessamy* (1753), Eliza Haywood goes even further in her pragmatism and tries to keep her female readers in constant questioning of the romantic ideas about conjugal life. She reminds the readers to approach the marriage cautiously as too many unhappy marriages

indicate that love declared during courtship is a mere rhetoric. Charlotte Lennox's *Henrietta* (1758) tackles a similar issue that can be observed in *The Fortunate Foundlings*. Lennox builds "her heroine's story to convey a broader lesson to women readers by weighing the advantages and disadvantages of social rebellion" (Green, 1991, p. 55). Hannah More's *Coelebs in Search of a Wife* (1808) offers a curious insight into the traditional courtship schema that is reversed in this book; in this instance, it is a man who searches for a wife. This bachelor meets (and declines) a few unmarried women, pointing out in the process that instead of becoming accomplished, the education these women had received made them ridiculous figures. Coelebs draws a conclusion of time wasted on improper girls' schooling that only oppresses them economically as well as psychologically. Mary Brunton ranks among other influential female writers, and her literary features were often a basis for Jane Austen's books. Mary Brunton's courtship novels *Self-Control. A Novel* (1811) and *Discipline* (1814) strengthen the mission of courtship novels in literature and urge the readers to think about the absurd requirements society puts on women. The main female protagonist in *Discipline* overhears her father regretting her gender: "It is a confounded pity she is a girl. If she had been of the right sort, she might have got into Parliament, and made a figure with the best of them. But now what use is her sense of?" (Brunton, 2012a, p. 4). The prevailing misconception of the only duty of a woman – to serve in the marriage – means there is no "use" of her before she gets married or outside the married life as she is not "of the right sort" of gender.

### **Mastering the Courtship Novels – Maria Edgeworth and Jane Austen**

In defiance of what these novels might have looked like at first glance when we immerse ourselves deeper than the apparent shallowness, we can spot a well-hidden, surprising message. Most narratives generally end with a wedding and subsequent promising conjugal life of a heroine, nevertheless, these books are filled with numerous minor female characters such as hysterical women, shrews, gossips, naïve or embittered women, who with all their faults, serve as bad examples for a modern contemporary woman to follow. Every female character in the book represents a different status that a woman holds in society. This helps to understand the environment they are set in, and it explains that their behaviour is simply the result of their efforts to cope with reality. This broad range of feminine protagonists offered the novelists a chance to depict the whole spectrum of opinions on the role of women, and it was up to the readers whose side they would take. The novelists expressed their attitudes through the main female characters, but at the same time, they did not judge the other characters or give solutions to how these characters should behave "appropriately". The aim was not to moralize but rather to strive to portray a life of vigorous heroines who can positively influence their lives, presuming they remain active in this sense. Pioneers among women writers engaging in debates about these issues were Maria Edgeworth and Jane Austen. The obvious move towards these sorts of concerns can be spotted in most works of the two fellow authors.

This is indeed the case of Maria Edgeworth's *Belinda* (1801), where the main character, Belinda, is subjected to conflicting positions where she forms her stance towards a marriage as a union of two equal partners whose personalities complement each other perfectly. Edgeworth probes "the business of the marriage market" in various subplots where contemporary courtship practice is explained through secondary characters. In this way, the author accentuates the



importance of the development of reasoning in the readers. Similar paradigms can be found in Edgeworth's *Manoeuvring* (1809) and *Patronage* (1814). "The places to which the girls were taken were Bath, London, Tunbridge, Weymouth, and Cheltenham. The correct technique apparently, was first to take the eligible girl or girls to one of the spas or watering places previous to her 'London campaign'. There reports were spread concerning her accomplishments and social connections. To dispose of one's daughters to the best advantage, as it was called, to make a fashionable marriage, it was necessary to follow this procedure" (Bradbrook, 1967, p. 115). Edgeworth adverts to this, primarily parental "manoeuvring" practice, as unsustainable by picturing the failure of the majority of such ambitions and highlighting certain characters who express the sensible approach to courtship which can subsequently lead to domestic happiness.

"The theme of education, the mistakes caused by self-deception encouraged by wrong standards and ideals, the attempt to live in accordance with principles that cannot be applied to the world of ordinary, normal personal relationships, lie behind much of Jane Austen's criticism of feminine triviality. An exaggerated idealism is, for her, as dangerous as an extreme cynicism" (Bradbrook, 1967, p. 90). Austen's heroines are fundamentally sensible young women; therefore, their misconceptions are only temporary and can be overcome in a short time. Highly emotional Marianne Dashwood from Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) proves the author's point. Affected by her dreamy sentimental viewpoints on relationships, this character acts impulsively and quite inappropriately towards the male character, John Willoughby, who, as a villain, does not deserve these passionate romantic sensations. After a series of misfortunes like Marianne's serious illness or Willoughby's choice of another, richer woman, this immature girl comes to her senses and finds a husband beside whom she can intellectually grow in a wedlock. This is a typical portrayal of contemporary fears that young people might be inclined to bad marriages or public indiscretions based on their unrealistic romantic fantasies.

In their works, Maria Edgeworth and Jane Austen gathered all that was essential in the literature of their predecessors and ensured that women's moral issues would be acknowledged and could not be obstinately ignored anymore.

## **Conclusion**

Some critics disapproved of the courtship novels, claiming that after describing a romantic pursuit secured by a successful engagement, the books end abruptly. There are no subsequent relationship guidelines on how to proceed with a newly acquired husband in a new milieu. This is true indeed, albeit later novels tackled this agenda in the nineteenth century. Yet, one must bear in mind that the main focus of the courtship novels was the short period of time in a young woman's life – before she got married. This limited stretch of time provided an opportunity for a woman to live the life according to her own wishes. In the era of growing feminist opinions, this precious brief phase offered young ladies a chance to think of all these ideas, learn a self-esteem and consequently implement these new germs in their future lives. This short autonomy in a woman's life was so educational that it became a starting line towards a new womanhood.

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