

# The Life of the Female Mind: Hester Mulso Chapone and the Gendered Rhetoric of Experience

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**Abstract:** *This article studies the writings of Hester Mulso Chapone (1727-1801) a prolific member of the late-eighteenth century Bluestocking circle. Working within genres traditionally available to women, most notably the conversational rhetoric of letters, Chapone advocates for an expanded social role and rhetorical education for young women. These letters later circulated publicly as Letters on Filial Obedience (1751) and Letters on the Improvement of the Mind (1773). Chapone's participation in a tradition of feminist writing deserves attention because of her success foregrounding personal experience as a source of authority and deploying personal writing to persuade, inform, and confront prevailing power structures.*

**Keywords:** *Conversational Rhetoric, Feminist Rhetoric, Life Writing, Bluestockings*

Hester Mulso Chapone (1727-1801) wrote prolifically in the eighteenth century and, together with the writers Elizabeth Montagu, Catharine Macaulay, Charlotte Lennox, Elizabeth Carter, Sarah Scott, Hannah More, and Frances Burney, influenced British intellectual culture. A member of this Bluestocking generation, Chapone was known during her life for her essays, letters, conversation, poetry, and advice on the education of young women. She maintained a reputation as an intellectual moralist into the nineteenth century, as her writings continued to be widely printed and read. Chapone worked within the genres of letters and conduct books—traditionally accessible to women—but expanded those genres to confront eighteenth-century notions of virtue and education. Her *Letters on Filial Obedience* (1751) and *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind* (1773) foreground her youth and femininity; she performs a

conservative stance while promulgating an expansive view of women's roles and rights.<sup>1</sup>

This article examines Chapone's rhetorical uses of personal writing and her theories of the rhetorical education of girls. Bluestocking writers have received little attention in rhetorical studies, but Jane Donawerth, Carol Poster, and Kimberly Harrison provide frameworks for studying pre-twentieth century women writers and the semi-private rhetorical practices of conversation, letter writing, and self-instruction.<sup>2</sup> Charlotte Hogg's question "What can be learned from rhetorical practices that don't forward the kind of radical women's agendas that have permeated our scholarship?" also motivates this research (392). While we have studied women who create liberatory opportunities within patriarchal institutions, conservative women who argue that self-direction and liberal education are compatible with traditionalist values receive less attention. Certainly, the Bluestockings diverged from the feminism of their time, and engaged conservative positions on gender. Since Chapone and her contemporaries did not "obviously or vociferously attempt to reform the condition or treatment of women," they have not emerged as historical feminist icons like Mary Wollstonecraft or Jane Austen (Guest 59). Literary scholar Moyra Haslett notes that they were praised for their refinement rather than their intellect, emphasizes their connections to conservative philosophers, and points to the fact that most shunned publicity (432). With this research in mind, my goal is not to argue that Chapone is a proto-feminist, but rather to understand how she enters public conversations to question limited rights and roles. Studying her work illuminates the tensions and values that structured women's participation in eighteenth-century rhetorical culture.

Letters and other forms of life writing present sites for studying the rhetorical practices of women during periods when elite males controlled rhetorical education and public address. Feminist rhetoricians have argued that

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1 I consult the editions of Chapone's writing published in *Catherine Talbot and Hester Chapone*, edited by Rhoda Zuk. This collection is volume three of *Bluestocking Feminism: Writings of the Bluestocking Circle, 1738-1785*, by general editor Gary Kelly.

2 Most research on the Bluestockings has appeared in the fields of literature and history. These studies tend to discuss the group as a whole, using individual writers as examples of conservatism, sociability, or satire (see "Bluestocking Feminism" by Harriet Guest and "Bluestocking Feminism Revisited" by Moyra Haslett). While these studies add to our knowledge of the Bluestocking's politics and reputation, there is more to say about the development and perspectives of individual rhetors such as Chapone.

“there are other forms of rhetoric besides public speaking,” expanded this definition of rhetoric, and analyzed women’s uses of communication other than public speech (Donawerth 2). Letters are one such communication form; they gained a “new privileged status” in the eighteenth century when authors increasingly transcribed, edited, and published private correspondence as a way to construct public identities (Curran 8). Carol Poster observes that letter writing “permeates a broader range of class and gender” than spoken public address and persuasive devices. These have been the primary concern of rhetorical theory but were “limited in most periods to a small group of elite males” (“Introduction” 2). Chapone’s letters blur these lines between public and private, personal and persuasive, and model rhetorical strategies for entering conversations with elite men.

Conduct literature provides another such site, as Nan Johnson and Jane Donawerth have shown. Chapone’s *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind* circulated as a conduct book during and after her lifetime, and became an influential statement on women’s education. Like the postbellum conduct literature Johnson studies, it has an ideological role in defining proper settings for women’s rhetoric (15). Unlike the subjects of Johnson’s study, however, Chapone does not limit that scope of appropriate rhetorical influence to the family. Her writing draws upon a conversational rhetoric—an artful, private exchange of ideas in an informal social setting—to join debates about legal and moral authority (Donawerth 11). Writers like Mary Astell and Margaret Cavendish had presented discourse as “modeled on conversation rather than public speaking” (39). Chapone uses conversational rhetoric to support women’s self-determination and advises her niece that mastering conversation will increase her social influence.

Chapone’s participation in a tradition of feminist writing deserves attention because of her success in foregrounding personal experience as a source of authority and deploying personal writing to persuade and inform. She seizes on the letter and conduct manual forms to model women’s rhetorical practices in public and guide young female readers in their own rhetorical educations. In *Letters on Filial Obedience*, Chapone’s half of a 1750–1751 correspondence with Richardson, she repudiates his claims about parental authority. *A Matrimonial Creed* (1751) performs a process of re-thinking the more radical of her claims about marriage, and negotiates a more conservative, acceptable persona in response to public criticism. Her second collection, *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind*, records a series of letters to her niece Jane Mulso. She is a demanding teacher, asking her niece to acquire knowledge and skill beyond typical middle-class feminine accomplishments. Chapone situates her critique of parental authority, and her call for young women to cultivate a life of the mind, in personal experience. Her writing foregrounds her gendered

perspective, her youth, and her social position, and she builds her arguments from this self-representation. Throughout her writing, Chapone balances her advocacy for women's education with a conservative stance on women's roles. By doing so, she models a way her readers might also navigate competing ideologies and demands.

### ***Letters on Filial Obedience (1750-1751)***

Hester Mulso Chapone's early education prepared her to join the Richardson and Bluestocking coteries. Raised as the "friend and companion" of her three brothers, she learned French, Italian, and Latin; enjoyed philosophy, poetry, and history; and wrote poetry and fiction of her own (Myers 76). Like other Bluestockings, Chapone cultivated friendships with male writers including Samuel Richardson and Samuel Johnson. Richardson and Chapone corresponded after meeting in the late 1740s, when Richardson was writing *Sir Charles Grandison* and seeking advice from female readers. Chapone's best-known letters to him address his novel *Clarissa* (1748) and the title character Clarissa Harlowe's duty to her parents in accepting a marriage partner. In three letters, now collectively referred to as *Letters on Filial Obedience*, Chapone responds to Richardson's invitation to write about her "sentiment on the subject . . . of filial duty and parental authority" (his letters to Chapone remain unlocated, but she quotes them in preparing her own arguments) (205). Such a discourse, she writes, "cannot but be highly advantageous and improving . . . and it is with this view that I am contented to expose my opinions to you, in order to have them rectified by you" (205). She enters their correspondence like a conversation between associates, if not equals.

However, Chapone shows little real interest in having her views rectified. A "self-styled champion of love and companionate marriage," Chapone argues for female choice of a partner during a period when the dominant view of marriage transitioned from a preference for arranged partnerships to a companionate model (Zuk 183). *Letters on Filial Obedience* participated in debates over that shift that took place in writing and in public discussion.<sup>3</sup> In these letters, she questions traditional ideas of duty and virtue by analyzing *Clarissa* and recounting her own observations of human character. She argues for a child's right to self-determination in marriage through her analysis of what she

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3 Laura Thomason places Chapone's writing in this context as well: "upper and middling classes in eighteenth-century England had begun to see marriage as, at least in theory, a matter of emotion as well as duty and socio-economic necessity. . . . Hester Mulso Chapone (1727-1801) demonstrated the anxious nature of this transition in her personal life and explored it in her writing" (67).

has seen and read, and also by presenting herself as an example of a young person capable of rational thought and virtuous action. These clashes over autonomy and marriage reflect Chapone's own experience. In 1754, Hester (then Mulso) became engaged to John Chapone, whom she had met through mutual acquaintance with Richardson. Her father delayed their marriage for six years, and the couple was married for only ten months before John Chapone's death in 1761.

Chapone's references to her girlishness and intellectual capabilities characterize her authorial voice in her letters and provide a strategy by which she can enter debate with Richardson. Aged twenty-three at the time of writing, she refers to Richardson as her "adopted papa" and to herself as "a saucy girl" (228). She downplays the merits of her arguments and reasoning; this strategy flatters Richardson, whose letters to Chapone seem to have both rebutted her arguments and encouraged further debate. Opening her second letter, Chapone praises Richardson's forbearance: "he will I know have patience with my weakness and absurdity; and though he cannot help sometimes shaking his head and crying 'Ah, Miss Mulso!' yet he will not do it with too much contempt; he will not *hate* me, even though I should persist in the wrong" (208). Her first letter is brief and tentative, but her second letter quotes Richardson's response, in which he urged "fresh arguments" and asked that she not "spare" him. Chapone obliges eloquently. Her second and third letters each run to nearly twenty pages, and her reticence and self-deprecation are largely rhetorical techniques. She continues to present herself as deferent, especially in openings and conclusions and just as she is about to expound upon particularly controversial topics. Letter III, for example, begins with her lament that she has "nothing to entertain [him] with but the rude essays of an ignorant girl, the unconnected sallies of a wild imagination, with but little judgment to direct or control it" (227). Such self-deprecation notwithstanding, she is a "close reasoner" and becomes more impassioned in her arguments as she responds to Richardson's refutations (Myers 143). Chapone rarely backs down from her own points or changes her argument, demonstrating confidence and facility as a rhetor who derives authority from her experience.

Chapone situates her ideas about reason and virtue first in a conversation about her reaction to *Clarissa*. She objects to characterizing *Clarissa* as immoral, undutiful, or dishonorable because the kind of obedience that destroys "all the peace and happiness" of a person's life is "an obedience which no human creature can have a right to exact from another" (206). Parental authority exists for the protection of children "whilst their reason is too weak to be trusted with the direct of their own actions," but when a child is grown up, submission originates from love and gratitude except where "a higher duty interferes" or when the sacrifice is beyond what "any degree of gratitude can require"

(206). Clarissa acted virtuously and wisely in refusing marriage to Solmes, and should not be “represented as continually afflicting her soul with remorse and fear, on account of this one action of self-defence” (206).

Chapone contends that Clarissa’s portrayed suffering is an unjust consequence of a decision that was entirely within her rights as a daughter who had reached the age of reason. She vigorously argues that her contemporaries’ characterizations of Clarissa as remorseful are inconsistent with the intelligence and discernment that Richardson has given to his protagonist:

Why is Clarissa, who is drawn as a woman of so good an understanding, and who reasons so justly on all other subjects, to be so superstitious and weak in her apprehensions of parental authority? She is so fettered by prejudice that she does not allow her reason to examine how far her conduct is to be justified or blamed; but implicitly joins with her father to condemn herself, when neither reason nor religion condemn her. Does not this, in some measure, call in question the foundation of her other virtues, which if not grounded on reason, but on blind prejudice and superstition, lose all their value? (206-7)

This astute reading of *Clarissa* and its incisive language illuminate Chapone’s definition of “virtue” and question the absolute authority of parents. Virtue is, above all, based upon reason and the powers of the mind (in this she follows Astell’s earlier writing on female education); “blind” obedience does no credit to the child or the parent. Chapone later expands this position beyond the context of Clarissa. The commandment to honor parents, she argues, “is very far from giving parents a power of command over their children, or an authority to make laws, and dispose, as they please, of their lives or *liberties*” (212). She enters into debate using “the gentle and easy air of conversation,” as Mary Astell recommends in *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (1697), but quickly expands beyond friendly discussion of *Clarissa* (quoted in Donawerth 37).

This close reading of *Clarissa* combines with Chapone’s own experience to repeatedly complicate the relationships between age and reason. Chapone argues that grown children might have stronger abilities to reason than their parents, and thus a greater claim to virtue. She asks “Is it possible that experience should produce error, and that the exemption of old people from the passions of youth, should be no better a privilege than to leave room for the love of money, which seems then to engross the whole soul, and to fill up the place of the other passions!” (217). This statement, which refers to the Harlowe family but resonates beyond *Clarissa*, is particularly provocative. A parent’s hold over adult sons and daughters is tenuous. Grown children may continue to observe the will of their father out of gratitude but not, Chapone argues,

because of moral obligation or because that parent necessarily has greater reason or virtue (235).

Chapone addresses Richardson as she disputes the intrinsic merits of old age. She begins, “my dear Sir, you who have by an amazing strength of thought and penetration, and unwearied observation, gained so much more knowledge of the world, and of the human heart . . . have too much real dignity to need to usurp upon our respect, or to exact that deference to your *years* which is due to your wisdom and virtue” (emphasis Chapone’s) (217). Richardson himself is one such example of a man who merits respect for his qualities rather than his age; she praises his “judgment” and “zeal for doing good” (217). Though she might anticipate the public scrutiny of her letters, I do not interpret these passages as merely ingratiating herself with Richardson. This particular adulation follows a series of questions that introduce one of her main concerns in the second letter: “Does the soul (one would be almost tempted to ask) *contract* and *shrivel up* with old age, like the body? And can time wither even virtue?” (217). She asserts that Richardson is not such a man, and that “a virtuous and wise old age is the object of [her] sincerest reverence and highest esteem” (217). However, Chapone does not equivocate in her subsequent “observations on those who claim our acquiescence in all their opinions”:

I see these people, in an advanced age, grown cold to all tender and good affections; . . . full of reverence for themselves and of contempt for youth, peevish, imperious, tyrannical, and self-conceited, yet manifestly weak in judgment, and dull of apprehension . . . But though there are some instances of this melancholy change for the worse, there are doubtless many of improvement and reformation; therefore perhaps this observation may be to no purpose here, unless it shews that a superiority of years does not always give real superiority; and that parents are sometimes the less qualified to judge of the real good and happiness of their children (emphasis Chapone’s). (218)

Chapone frames her argument with modesty and deference, but presents the claims themselves in strong and precise language that echoes Richardson’s characterizations in *Clarissa*. Writing techniques of strategic or rhetorical girl-iness give way to assertions that show the extent of her own intelligence, goodwill, and powers of observation.

By beginning with the personal—her reflections on *Clarissa* and her performance of a “reverence next to filial” for Richardson—she gains entry to a debate over structures of power based on John Locke’s *Two Treatises of Government* (227). In letters II and III Chapone makes a case for the validity of her observations despite her youth and gender. By balancing humility and confidence in her argumentation—the truth of Richardson’s “considerations”

does not “overturn” her own assertion—she provides a model by which other women can engage with dominant voices (236). She speaks specifically of father-daughter relationships (between herself and Mr. Richardson, and between Clarissa and Mr. Harlowe) to create a space for exploring theories of rights and authority. She does not argue for a radical restructuring of parent-child relations, but for giving reason primacy over age. Chapone shows that one is not dependent upon the other: parents may have lost “the tenderness and sensibility of their *hearts*, without adding much to the strength and capacity of their *heads*” (218). At the same time, “he who has . . . spent his life in pressing forward to the prize of his high calling, will be nearer the attainment of perfection in an advanced age, than he who has but begun his race can be” (217). In this final letter, she presses her conviction of daughters’ “natural liberty arising from reason” (236). Women are capable of knowing the law they are under, so particular circumstances and “the customs of the world” do not destroy the “*general truth that women, as rational and accountable beings, are free agents as well as men*” (237). Chapone uses a personal, anecdotal approach based on experience, often domestic, but combines that feminine style with appeals to scripture and philosophy. Women might choose a personal form of writing, but Chapone’s letters demonstrate that this rhetoric does not exclude other strategies or limit her effectiveness in public debate with a famous man.

### ***A Matrimonial Creed***

Within a year of *Letters on Filial Obedience*, Chapone responded to Richardson’s request that she explain her beliefs about duties within marriage. *A Matrimonial Creed*, a nine-page transitional text published after *Letters on Filial Obedience* and before *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind*, backs away from her more radical claims about women’s rights and roles. Chapone opens the *Creed* by citing criticisms that she received for her earlier writing: “Being told one evening that I could not be quite a good girl, whilst I retained some particular notions concerning the behavior of husbands and wives; being told that I was intoxicated with false sentiments of dignity; that I was proud, rebellious, a little spitfire, &c. I thought it behoved me to examine my own mind on these particulars” (251). Her “own mind” appears to have been influenced by conservative ideas of marriage. The first article of her creed states, “I believe that a husband has a divine right to the absolute obedience of his wife” except for when that obedience interferes with her duties to God. Furthermore, she explains, “the divine institution which gives him this right . . . [is] founded on some natural advantages and superiority of the man, which make the law of obedience a wise, just, and merciful law, with respect to the woman” (252). As literary scholar Betty Schellenberg observes, she invests “considerable



rhetorical skill . . . in maintaining the fine balance between debate on equal intellectual terms and the requirements of respectful submission to a male elder" (320). Chapone also shifts the subject of her argument from filial relationships to spousal relationships, a strategic move to a matter on which she held more mainstream views.

Chapone could be read as defending herself against the reputation of being "unmanageable and unmarriageable" that she gained because of her assertive debate with Richardson (Zuk 249). No documents record a backlash against *Filial Obedience*, or Chapone's change of opinions. Laura Thomas conjectures that "a genteel woman had to be careful not to appear hostile to marriage and shut herself out of the market" (83). Readers might also conjecture that Chapone maneuvered to retain her position in intellectual society by backing away from many earlier claims about the authority of parents. If her opinions appear to be different in a *Matrimonial Creed*, she tells her audience that it is because of "the arguments I have since heard, and the reflections I have made" (252). Her tone has changed as well. A more restrained writer than the young woman who declared that marriage without love amounted to perjury before God, Chapone explains that a woman "should choose a husband one whom she can heartily and willingly acknowledge her superior, and whose judgment and understanding she can prefer to her own" (252). Here, her emphasis remains on the woman's choice. If a married couple is to enjoy the friendship, conjugal happiness, and "mutual preference of each other's happiness to their own" that Chapone holds as the ideal marriage, a woman must be able to decline any man she does not respect (254).

In *A Matrimonial Creed*, Chapone works to counter the dismissive charge that she has "false sentiments of dignity" and establish herself as a writer who critiques traditional views of gender from a respectable, credible position. This shorter text does not deploy personal narrative or experience as directly as does *Filial Obedience*, nor does it use the form of personal correspondence. However, readers can see Chapone calibrating her persona and argument to remain acceptable to her conservative coterie. For example, *A Matrimonial Creed* distinguishes between types of hierarchies; Chapone declares that she would be "a loyal subject, but a rebellious slave" (254). For Chapone, as for many women, "there is no comfortable ethos to employ" in her work with which to "shift the dominant discourse" on the roles of women and girls (Ryan, Myers, and Jones, 2). Whereas the role of saucy literary daughter suited her earlier writing, Chapone found it necessary to develop a new persona. Her creed responds to Richardson's request, but in this document she moves away from playful letters and adopts a sober authorial voice. She is not antifeminist, but she emerges more distinctly as a conservative whose ideologies, practices, and self-representation largely uphold dominant, patriarchal cultural norms

(Hogg 393). And yet, *A Matrimonial Creed* makes a case that companionate marriage and liberal education fit within existing hierarchies and separate social roles. This document holds in tension conservative views of marriage and progressive views of gender, anticipating the educational advice in her subsequent writings.

### ***Letters on the Improvement of the Mind (1773)***

*Letters on the Improvement of the Mind*, published and read as a conduct manual for upper- and middle-class young women, addresses the nature of virtue and its development more directly than does *Letters on Filial Obedience*. Published in 1773 when Chapone's niece, Jane, was fifteen years old, this text was reprinted at least thirty-one times, taught in schools and in homes, and translated into French in 1829 (Myers 231). Chapone advises Jane on studying the Bible, maintaining a household economy, choosing friendships, navigating courtship and marriage, maintaining family relationships, and controlling her temper. In comparison to the advice given by her female contemporaries and male authors, this instruction has a progressive ring. *Letters* does not call for reform in social norms and legal rights, but envisions an expansive life of the mind and a public role for young women.

Chapone remains skeptical of the idea that sons and daughters have a "duty" to obey their parents' choices and disputes that age necessarily increases wisdom and reason. However, Chapone tempers her discussion with a greater emphasis on conservative moral and social principles than she had demonstrated in *Letters on Filial Obedience*. This type of compromise, Kathryn Sutherland argues, is "implicit in women educationalists' mid century plans to promote female seriousness" (31). Sutherland addresses the difficulty for the modern reader who wishes to "enter sympathetically the ideological boundaries of the conduct manual" today:

The problem is twofold: writers whom we would now wish to distinguish on grounds of gender, known political sympathies, or opportunities, often share a common discursive construction (and containment) of femininity; and, alternatively, proposals for female education are subject to inflections of gender, rank (class), and religion that we now find uncomfortable to articulate. (29)

To apply twenty-first-century ideals of feminism to describe Chapone and the Bluestockings, or to characterize them as proto-feminist, overlooks the situated nature of their writing—historical and cultural contexts that writers describe and sometimes critique through personal experiences and perspectives. Chapone became well known and influential, but did not call for changes in women's formal educations or for dramatic expansions of their

opportunities and spheres. In *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind*, she continues to develop a rhetoric based in conversation and in strategic uses of the personal. She expands traditionally feminine genres of writing to negotiate a series of difficult intellectual positions. Situating herself as an accomplished, affectionate mentor to her reader, she advocates for female intellectual development, a degree of independence, and rhetorical agency within the conservative principles of conduct that governed relationships between men and women.

Chapone wrote and published *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind* twenty years after her earlier works, during which time she was engaged, married, and widowed. This period also saw the increased popularity of conduct manuals and books on female education by both male and female writers, a trend that would continue into the nineteenth century. Popular conduct books included Lady Sarah Pennington's *An Unfortunate Mother's Advice to her Absent Daughters* in 1761, and Fordyce's *Sermons to Young Women* in 1766 (widely read and reprinted at the time and today known to some readers because of Austen's reference in *Pride and Prejudice*). Following Chapone's *Letters*, John Gregory published *A Father's Legacy to his Daughters* (1774), Hannah More published *Essays on Various Subjects, Principally Designed for Young Ladies* (1777), and Mary Wollstonecraft published *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787). Conduct books of this period, including More's, helped to "construct and enforce separate spheres of conversational duties for men and women as a basis for quite rigid gender roles" (Donawerth 47). Chapone replies to the traditional ideal of femininity that Fordyce, Gregory, and others describe. Crucially, though, she does not reproduce their main emphases, particularly in discussing young women's conversation and study.

Donawerth suggests that we read conduct book rhetoric "as initiating the reader into a discourse community" (43). Considering *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind* in this way shows that Chapone advises her niece to aspire to a sophisticated understanding of religion, history, and conversation—an education beyond middle-class femininity. Chapone's discussion of female conduct and rhetorical practices diverges from Fordyce on the difference between inward cultivation and outward behavior. She also articulates clear support for developing literacy in theology, the Bible, and non-Christian religions, and she argues that religious faith should be the basis of a young woman's education, because "the only sure foundation of human virtue is religion" (262). Religion, furthermore, is based in rational thought and serious study of the Bible. "Too many people," she writes, "who have read it [in the time and manner in which children usually read the Bible] without understanding it in their youth, satisfy themselves that they know enough of it, and never afterwards study it with attention" (267). Chapone tells her niece Jane

"you must inform your understanding what you ought to *believe* and to *do*" and recommends that she read the entire Bible, including Old Testament books of history and prophecy and the New Testament book of Revelation (emphasis Chapone's) (262).

On the one hand, instruction to read the Bible is a conservative recommendation for a young female reader, but Chapone's instruction revises advice from male writers. Fordyce and Gregory recommend superficial and purely devotional readings of the Bible and caution against concern with obscure topics and questions.<sup>4</sup> For Fordyce, religion makes the practice of virtue appealing; he recommends that "the firmness, with which so many of you guard your virtue, being transferred to the practice of Piety at large, will, by God's assistance, contribute to render it easy and delightful" and religion will "support and cheer you under the restraints of conscience and decorum" (2:54-55). Fordyce dwells on the behavior of young women. In contrast, Chapone addresses their habits of thought. She privileges study of the Bible over "senseless enthusiasm and frantic raptures, more like the wild excesses of the most depraved human love than that reasonable adoration, that holy and reverential love, which is due to the pure and holy Father of the universe" (362). She hopes her niece will learn to examine "the evidence of the Christian religion, and be convinced, on rational grounds, of its divine authority" (265). Chapone doesn't dismiss the importance of studying Christian apologetics or advise against familiarity with other religions. Echoing her earlier assertions against the presumed reason and authority of old age, she argues that reverence for the Christian god and belief system be based on careful study rather than assumptions of superiority.

When she wrote to Jane, Chapone would not have known John Gregory's *A Father's Legacy to his Daughters*, published the year after *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind*. He does exemplify certain ways of thinking that were contemporary with Chapone's writing and to which she almost certainly responded. Gregory's introduction appeals to his audience's interest in the relationship between an actual father and his daughters, and seems to refer to the format of Chapone's letters to her actual niece. Like Fordyce, Gregory separates religious faith and devotion from reason and study: "Do not meddle with controversy . . . Avoid all books, and all conversations that tend to shake your faith . . . I would advise you to read only such religious books as are addressed to the heart, such as inspire pious and devout affections" (14-15). He instructs young women that their sensitive natures make them well-suited to

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4 For more on this controversial treatment of religion, see Julie Straight, "Religious Controversy in Hester Chapone's *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind*."

the practices of religion, and adds that religion is the only consolation that women, who cannot “plunge into despair or dissipate . . . in pleasure and riot,” have in the face of anguish (10-11). Religion is also the only restraint against “the natural vivacity, and perhaps the natural vanity” of females (12).

If Chapone is conservative in contrast with Mary Wollstonecraft, she is radical in comparison with Fordyce and Gregory’s treatments of women’s rhetorical education. Gregory recommends, “if you happen to have any learning, keep it a profound secret, especially from the men, who generally look with a jealous and malignant eye on a woman of great parts, and a cultivated understanding” (31-32). Chapone opposes such timidity and aversion to education, though she excuses the humble and ignorant mind of a young person who has seen little of the world. She advises Jane:

to give each [conversation partner] their due share of attention and notice—not engrossing the talk, when others are desirous to speak, nor suffering the conversation to flag, for want of introducing something to continue or renew a subject; not to push your advantages in argument so far that your antagonist cannot retreat with honour (327).

In preparation for social exchange, and for personal pleasure, she recommends extensive reading: the Bible, books on religion, Shakespeare, Milton (especially *Paradise Lost*), Homer and Virgil, poetry, and Greek mythology. Chapone extols reading history, too, explaining that “a woman makes a poor figure who affects, as I have heard some ladies to, to disclaim all knowledge of times and dates . . . the highest mark of folly is to be proud of such ignorance” (344-345). Harrison’s concept of self-rhetorics, “women’s cultivation of agency and of a rhetorical self,” helps to explain the significance of this private study (15). Like the diarists in the American South that Harrison studies, Chapone engages in “personal, symbolic construction, revision, and maintenance of a rhetorical self” in her study and in her letters (15). This rhetorical work involves self-persuasion—the examination of one’s own mind—to more clearly understand the topic or ideology at hand, and serves as “preparation for public interaction” (16). She advises her niece to do likewise while pursuing her education.

Chapone is also liberal in comparison with Bluestocking Hannah More, author of *Essays on Various Subjects, Principally Designed for Young Ladies* (1777) and three other conduct books. Donawerth notes that More emphasizes “women’s roles as good listeners, as facilitators of men’s conversation, and as household managers of communication” (45). More’s 1799 *Strictures on Female Education* continues to advise a limited conversational role. As Donawerth shows, More essentializes “certain powers of communication as inherently feminine,” including grammar, style, and knowledge that arises from reflection

and observation (48).<sup>5</sup> Chapone published *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind* before More joined the London Bluestocking circle in 1774, so she was not responding to More's writing or ideas. Rather, her approach to rhetorical education contrasts with those of her contemporaries. She links conversation—a social activity—to private study; she recommends a wide-ranging reading list for her niece, and also displays her own thorough knowledge of literature and history. Chapone's Letters 9 and 10 summarize events of Western history and names texts that describe those events in more detail. This performance, like her close reading of *Clarissa*, asserts that reading and study join observation and reflection as appropriate foundations for women's speech and writing.

Chapone is unusual for situating her rhetorical instruction in discussions of how to be pleasing to society and friends in general, rather than to men in particular. Notably, she takes less interest in marriage and marriageability as the goal of education than do her contemporaries. Chapone has a positive view of marriage based on mutual regard and respect, and counsels her niece that she will "have the fairest chance of the best blessings the world can afford, in a faithful and virtuous union with a worthy man" (305). In the same passage, though, she advises that "if this happy lot should be denied you, do not be afraid of a single life. A worthy woman is never destitute of valuable friends . . . she must be honoured by all persons of sense and virtue, for preferring the single state to a union unworthy of her" (305). With characteristic emphasis on individual choice and personal merit, she envisions marriage as neither the end goal of self-improvement nor entirely necessary for a female to be valued.

This placement of marriage as a secondary concern in the pursuit of virtue and improvement is one aspect of Chapone's wide vision of a woman's role in society. She references and contradicts the instructions given to young women to be silent, including More's praise for "the silence of sparkling intelligence" (qtd in Donawerth 47). Young women who speak "without conceit or affectation" are "more pleasing than those, who sit like statues without sense or motion" (Chapone, *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind* 328). Politeness requires not only presence of mind and a quick judgment of how to best respond in a situation; this skill requires that a young woman be comfortable speaking in a discourse community that extends beyond her peers. She may assist a hostess by doing so, and she contributes to intellectual exchange by conversing with her father's guests (328). Chapone does not see girls as future

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5 Scholars of the Bluestockings argue that although More herself had an early education and literary career, and certainly benefited from the achievements of the older Bluestockings, she was "the most regressive in her attitudes towards the advancement of women" (Myers 260).

women who must learn the skills to acquit themselves well in future domestic responsibilities. Women, in her view and in her own experience, become active members of their social circles in their youth through individual/private and collaborative/public rhetorical practices.

## Conclusion

Fordyce advises young women, “Your life is a series of self-denials,” a limiting, enclosing statement that excludes the possibility of active self-development (2:56). Chapone is unusual for advocating a system of education that, while not preparation for economic independence, envisions expansive roles for her readers. Chapone expects that women will be valued, active members of society even while when they are young, and certainly as they move into adulthood. Both *Letters on Filial Obedience* and *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind* present Chapone herself as one such informed, graceful rhetor contributing to her intellectual community. Her lessons in *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind* include “useful plain sense,” to borrow the apt phrase with which Jane Austen describes Catherine Morland’s sturdy, middle-class mother in *Northanger Abbey* (13). Her educational philosophy resonates in Austen’s novels, testifying to the continuing influence of Chapone’s views of virtue and education. Furthermore, Austen’s interest in “conversation as the arena in which a woman exercises her eloquence” echoes Chapone’s concern with a young woman’s readiness for rhetorical participation in her social milieu (Donawerth 41).<sup>6</sup> Chapone’s rhetoric contributed to the environment in which British women novelists and activists emerged.

I find Chapone a compelling writer. One goal of this project is to recover her as an eighteenth century woman who uses feminist rhetorical practices to advocate for the rights of women and girls. Because she is fundamentally conservative, I have chosen not to identify her as feminist in this article. Instead, I analyze the interplay between her conservative stances and her assertions of women’s intelligence and rhetorical agency. My research typically focuses on twentieth-century and contemporary life narrative, but earlier authors who use personal writing to negotiate changing ideologies of gender form an important part of this tradition. Expounding on her positions in ostensibly private texts that circulated publicly, Chapone demonstrates the rhetorical potential of personal genres like letters, and the rhetorical power of personal narrative in combination with intellectual training. Studies of Chapone formulate her argumentation in terms of paradoxes: she recommends to young women a

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6 Donawerth cites Austen’s *Lady Susan* (1793-94?) as an example of the high value that eighteenth-century English society placed on conversation, reflected in conduct manuals.

reading practice that “simultaneously move to open up and close down individual reading” (Steele 483); she expresses her deference even while displaying her confidence and ability; and she benefited from the Richardson coterie but also experienced its constraints due to age and gender. I agree with these interpretations, and I see other implications of Chapone’s autobiographical content and indirect approach. This is a way of responding to binaries or oppositions that structure the debates in the Bluestocking and Richardson coterie (male/female, parents/children, duty/freedom, reason/emotion). By balancing two positions in tension, or oscillating between them, she models a way her readers might also thrive among competing cultural and political influences.

Analyses of *Letters on Filial Obedience* and *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind* have concluded that Chapone’s self-effacement and conservatism accommodate the gender politics of her time, and mask—or make acceptable—her controversial views and assertive reasoning. I propose that her perceptive combination of deferent tone and controversial content constitutes a more deft strategy than has been previously recognized. *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind* instructs young women on expanding the kinds of rhetorical ability that she demonstrated in her letters to Richardson—abilities that equip young women to engage in conversation and reflection. Chapone’s own education, reason, and virtue call into question hegemonic ideas about gender and youth, as well as ideological reasons for limiting young women’s autonomy.

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