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Acknowledgments

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An Almost Perfect Heroine: Prudence in *Henrietta* by Charlotte Lennox

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The protagonist in Charlotte Lennox's *Henrietta* is an orphaned eighteenth-century young lady, named Henrietta Courteney. She runs from an arranged marriage to live independently, rejecting the traditional options society offers young women like her: marrying for financial stability or becoming a nun. However, her defiance is based on and redeemed by prudence, which carries broad connotations as one of the four natural or cardinal virtues along with justice, temperance, and fortitude. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, prudence means "the ability to recognize and follow the most suitable or sensible course of action," as it requires "good sense... discretion, circumspection, [and] caution." As Henrietta matures, she develops those qualities, and Lennox (1729-1804) sets the standard for the coming-of-age genre. In fact, editors of the 2008 edition of *Henrietta*, Ruth Perry and Susan Carlile, refer to Charlotte Lennox's 1758 novel as a "bildungsroman, the story of a young woman's education in the ways of the world, like Frances Burney's *Evelina* or Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, although written long before either of them" (ix). As the predecessor of those other well-known authors, Lennox establishes herself as a relevant novelist. A close reading of *Henrietta* exposes its literary significance within the rise of the English novel, its influence on eighteenth-century British society, and the duality of its title character, who defies societal norms while sustaining a model of prudence.

Lennox wrote *Henrietta* during the rise of the novel as a genre, a time when many scholars and educators thought novels had an adverse impact on the lives of young women. One such luminary was Samuel Johnson, who hypothesized about the content of this new form of literature and its effects on inexperienced young ladies with impressionable minds:

These books are written chiefly to the young, the ignorant, and the idle, to whom they serve as lectures of conduct, and introductions into life. They are the entertainment of minds unfurnished with ideas, and therefore easily susceptible of impressions; not fixed by principles, and therefore easily following the current of fancy; not informed by experience, and consequently open to every false suggestion and partial account. (18)

Johnson presumes that the fictional worlds of novels, being too similar to reality, would put unrealistic perceptions and expectations in the minds of young women. Furthermore, in his authoritative work *Imagining Women Readers*, Richard De Ritter addresses the belief that young ladies were only to read "well chosen books." Continuing his discussion, De Ritter

quotes J. L. Chirol, an early nineteenth-century royal Chaplain and author of *An Enquiry into the Best System of Female Education; or, Boarding School and Home Education Attentively Considered*, which denounces the practice of reading for pleasure as opposed to reading for the sole purpose of personal betterment. Chirol writes that books of “mischievous descriptions ... are calculated to irritate the senses, to inflame the imagination, to relax soul and body at once,” which can lead naïve young ladies toward pernicious thoughts and actions (qtd. in De Ritter 3). These assertions reinforced the widespread unease with the quality of the readings available to eighteenth-century young women. In other words, if the narratives did not include female characters happily performing spousal or maternal duties, such stories were considered unfit for the eyes of young women.

Moreover, *Henrietta* arguably marks a cultural shift in the eighteenth-century British society as a new perception of morality and of marriage for love emerges and coincides with the proliferation of novels among middle-class female readers. In *Consensual Fictions: Women, Liberalism, and the English Novel*, Wendy Jones explains how novelists in the latter half of the eighteenth century “reinvented their fictions in the image of a largely middle-class audience who characterized themselves as guardians of virtue ... asserting the novel’s moral and didactic nature” (8). Although financially arranged marriages were still prevalent at that time, a few British young ladies began to evade such loveless transactions, in the same way that Lennox’s heroine does. Increasingly, popular novels reflected this rising concept of romantic marriage; according to Jones, “the novel represents desire as constituted by a different kind of value: moral worth” (8). Lennox’s narrative embodies this unconventional idea of choice in marriage that ultimately replaces the notion of traditionally arranged marriages, and Lennox’s heroine demonstrates a new yet moral means of becoming a woman in Britain. Thus, the text decidedly influences societal changes.

This belief in companionate marriage casts young Henrietta within a somewhat subversive light, as she rejects an offer for an arranged

marriage and later accepts a position as a maid in an upper-class household. However, Henrietta works as a maid – an occupation scandalously beneath a lady of her quality and social status – entirely because securing employment meant that she could provide for herself financially and postpone marriage until she could marry for love. Katherine Rogers describes arranged marriages in *Before Their Time*: “Women were often forced into marriage, either by family pressure or financial need, since most had no opportunities for supporting themselves. And marriage was oppressive” (ix). Lennox’s heroine, despite her youthful indiscretions, prizes richness of morality over material wealth, and she is prudently steadfast. In their introduction to the novel, Perry and Carlile discuss how Henrietta “actively attempts to live an uncompromised life [and] spends most of the book calmly but firmly telling an interesting assortment of people what she will and will not do for money” (ix). Indeed, Henrietta continues to decline marriage offers from multiple suitors with no shortage of money until she falls in love with and marries Lord Mervil Clairville, making the heroine’s dream of a romantic union a reality.

Henrietta’s prudence informs and redeems her defiant behavior, stressing the duality of her character. For instance, Henrietta only runs away because she recognizes that marriage exists as a sacred vow which she does not take lightly. She explains, “I am determined never to give my hand till I can give my heart with it; for I have no notion of being perjured at the altar, and of vowing to love, honour, and obey, when it is impossible for me to do either” (63). Henrietta is not willing to “bend truth to suit venal purposes” since, unlike most of the other characters in the novel, she places more importance on integrity than monetary gain (Perry and Carlile ix). When Henrietta beseeches Mr. Damer to help reconcile the situation with her Catholic aunt, Lady Meadows, she assures him of “being resolved to obey her [aunt’s] will in every thing [sic], provided she might not be compelled to marry the old baronet, nor confined in a nunnery with a view to the change of her religion” (Lennox 86). Henrietta wishes to be obedient, but she will not forsake

her Protestant religion or integrity and marry a Catholic man for money. Subsequently, her choice to defy her aunt and denounce propriety circumvents a betrayal of her principles. At first, Henrietta's decisions could seem reckless and be interpreted as a negative influence on young women, but ultimately her actions exemplify prudence in spiritual strength and recognition of her esteemed values.

Lennox explores this duality to justify the heroine's actions with prudence and to retain the novel's didactic nature. As Bannet explains in "Rewriting the Social Text: The Female Bildungsroman in Eighteenth-Century England," "[e]ighteenth-century lady-novelists, literary theorists, reviewers, essayists, moralists, and educationists well understood the power that fictions exercise over life" (196). Governed by the existing concern towards the quality of readings made accessible to young women, many likely perceived *Henrietta* to be inappropriate reading for eighteenth-century daughters who were expected to educate themselves in little more than good manners, cooking, and music. However, Lennox does not endorse young women running away from home, but rather that Henrietta, even amid mistakes, demonstrates prudence and high moral standards, sentiments that affirm the novel's didactic goal and suitability for the young and inexperienced reader. Henrietta herself emphasizes her learning experience when she sighs and admits to Mrs. Willis, "I have not always been prudent... but misfortunes, as you once told me, teach us wisdom" (Lennox 194). In this "more ambiguous" version of the female *Bildungsroman*, "reeducation ... happen[s] to the heroine rather than the reader" (Bannet 227).

In the eighteenth-century context, the title character's actions are nothing short of scandalous and dangerous, but her reflection on her experiences promotes prudence. In the twenty-first century, Henrietta would be considered an exemplary heroine because she would be admired for breaking cultural norms and seeking personal, religious, and financial independence. Arguably Lennox cleared the way for this understanding through the representation of Henrietta's own capacity for growth and

reflection.

Evidence of Henrietta's prudence appears again in her natural ability to take pause at critical moments and evaluate potential consequences before she acts. She contemplates her options and looks ahead, while equally considering others' needs with her own. For instance, when she leaves home to escape the arranged marriage, she adopts the alias "Miss Benson" not only to avoid being found but also to prevent tainting the family's name. For a young lady of high social status such as Henrietta, seeking employment as a housemaid is considered a "low condition." Henrietta explains, "[My aunt's] pride will no doubt be sensibly wounded, when she finds that I am determined in my choice; if anything can make her recede from her purpose, it will be the shame of seeing her niece reduced so low" (194). Henrietta knows her aunt would be the subject of shame since keeping up appearances remains a matter of undue concern among the upper social classes of eighteenth-century England. While she shows the intelligence and willpower to do what she determines best for herself, she keeps in mind how her life affects the lives of those around her. Still, Lennox does not indulge in conflict to the extent of rendering Henrietta weak or insecure, as the heroine's inner conversations serve to demonstrate the prudence of deliberating the consequences of one's pronouncements.

Furthermore, Henrietta does not always make the right choices, but her behavior and reflection throughout the novel render her a model of prudence. This prudence extends to a reevaluation of her actions after the fact. While the average person might not reflect upon past decisions, Henrietta frequently debates whether she made the right assessments and learned from her experiences. After composing an indignant letter to Lady Meadows in response to the attempted arranged marriage, Henrietta admits remorse in writing "so saucily" about her longtime caretaker (64). In fact, she goes as far as writing her benefactor, Mr. Damer Sr., to whom she "earnestly intreated his good offices towards effecting a reconciliation between her aunt and her" (86). Such remorse displays keen discernment between right and wrong since the heroine

must honor and respect her aunt who raised an orphaned niece as a daughter. This discernment remains integral to the concept of Henrietta's pursuit of a prudent life as she carves her position in society by seeking her independence.

While the title character shows appropriate remorse for some of her actions, she manages to feel satisfied with most of her decisions. After falling in love with Lord Clairville, Henrietta ponders the validity and motives of her feelings: "Must she deny herself the pleasure of approving [his] virtue and merit, for fear of loving it too much? It was thus she argued, and soon dispelled those doubts which Miss Belmour's raillery had raised in her mind" (208). After briefly questioning the acceptability of her attraction to Clairville, she accepts that she is blameless, recognizing the source of her doubt as Miss Belmour's harmless teasing. Lennox insightfully delves into a profound aspect of human nature – one's tendency to question and even resist being content with past choices – but Henrietta models the ideal ascension from that destructive tendency. These very feelings cause her to question her attraction toward Lord Clairville: "but was she weak enough to be dazzled with the beauty of a man? No, certainly; his countenance pleased her, because it was a picture of his mind; candor, sweetness, benevolence, shined in every feature" (208). Although she justifies her feelings of attraction and dismisses her unfounded concern, the fact that the heroine wonders if vanity might have been at play shows her reflective nature and vigilance against impure thoughts or motives.

As Henrietta demonstrates the necessity of prudence to lead an independent life, her ambition does not exclude humility. While she could not allow herself to be forced into marriage by Lady Meadows, she does not ignore, nor forget, all the goodness she has received from her aunt. In fact, Henrietta confides in her newfound London friend, Miss Woodby, revealing appreciation for Lady Meadows' generosity:

She took me, a poor helpless orphan, under her protection, and during some time treated me with the tenderness of a mother. Within these few weeks I have unhappily lost her favour, not

by any fault of mine, I assure you, for I have always loved and revered her. Nothing should have obliged me to take this step, which has no doubt an appearance of ingratitude, but the fear of being forced to marry a man I hate. (10-11)

Despite Lady Meadows' attempt to impose marriage outside of her niece's faith and to force a union of profit rather than love, Henrietta openly expresses gratitude toward her aunt. When Henrietta finally marries the man whom she loves, she confirms that success and joy come from determination to adhere to her core principles and not from elevated societal affluence. Unlike the traditional eighteenth-century narrative, Lennox's plot embraces Henrietta's prudence along with her resolve, as she makes sensible life decisions where humility and remorse outweigh vanity.

Lennox uses the concept of vanity, one of the many shortfalls of human nature and the antithesis of humility, to further explicate Henrietta's prudence. When Henrietta feels remorse over her harsh letter to her aunt, she recognizes that simply by writing it, she denigrated the only person whose support and protection she could rely upon, "merely to display wit" (Lennox 65). In this lapse of judgment, Henrietta learns that vanity is a vice that degrades one's character and contradicts prudence because the remorse for disrespecting her aunt overwhelms her. Lennox explores vanity also through Henrietta's friend, Miss Woodby, who falls prey to vanity to a much greater extent than Henrietta. When one of Henrietta's suitors lures Miss Woodby with compliments, she betrays her friend's confidence and reveals Henrietta's secret identity. This flattery affects Miss Woodby "like strong liquors upon a weak head... she became so intoxicated that she hardly knew what she did" (90). Miss Woodby's blinding vanity directly results in the betrayal of Henrietta's confidence. This leads to the suitor entering Henrietta's closet, which in the eighteenth-century was a small bedroom meant to afford ladies with privacy. Henrietta is overwhelmed with terror upon finding the man in her room, and she is entirely disappointed when she learns Miss Woodby dishonored her confidence. Nonetheless, Henrietta describes the treachery

as “a very useful discovery, for otherwise [she] should still have confided in her [friend], and been again betrayed” (98). Henrietta learns from the bitter events to be more discerning of friends, a testament to her prudence. The “inviolable attachment” and “violent friendship” that Miss Woodby declared to feel toward Henrietta is then shattered, due to Miss Woodby’s blinding vanity (11, 91). Lennox’s heroine stands in direct juxtaposition to Miss Woodby, who lacks prudence and displays plenty of vanity and frivolousness, reinforcing the characterization of prudence in Lennox’s heroine.

Henrietta’s prudence makes her likable and attractive as secondary characters recognize her unique moral qualities. Nearly every character in the novel—Miss Woodby, the intrusive closet suitor Mr. Damer, Mrs. Willis, Miss Belmour, and Lord Clairville—becomes immediately fond of Henrietta upon meeting her. For instance, Miss Woodby offers the compliment, “And do you imagine ... that with a form so pleasing, and an understanding so distinguished, you will be exempt from the tax that envy is sure to levy upon merit?” (80-81). Clearly, Miss Woodby envies the physical and intellectual attributes of Lennox’s heroine. In another example, Miss Eccles describes Henrietta’s distinguished and reserved nature to her lodger, the young gentleman, who declares: “This is a strange girl ... Who can she be? I vow to God, I believe I shall be in love with her in earnest” (85). Henrietta’s prudence evidently makes her attractive and amiable to Miss Woodby and Mr. Damer. On the other hand, the far less prudent Miss Woodby receives a much different treatment. Miss Eccles describes her as a “gay, flighty lady,” the intrusive closet suitor describes her as an “ugly creature,” and Mrs. White as “a disagreeable creature as ever [her] eyes beheld” (85-125). Once more, Miss Woodby’s antithesis serves to enhance the heroine’s character because being independent, or even simply being intelligent, is not expected of women of their time, yet Henrietta realizes all those virtues while remaining prudent.

In creating a character who is both a runaway and an exemplary model of prudence, Lennox constructs an almost perfect heroine. Henrietta

Courteney is defiant, yet prudent. This duality of character may cause internal and external conflicts, but it ultimately becomes Henrietta’s strength, for she only can live contently when she does not sacrifice her dignity and humility. She succeeds in life despite her youth and lack of family support because morality and virtue guide her, as she navigates “a society that is repeatedly surprised by the spectacle of this young woman of quality without friends, family, or an establishment” (Perry and Carlile ix). *Henrietta* stands as a didactic text for young women in eighteenth-century Britain when the novel genre is beginning to assert its influence within middle-class female readers. The novel genre “embrac[ed] the probable and familiar” and thus in the eighteenth century had to balance between “the real and the ideal” (Bannet 202, 200). Conservative parents and ministers push for the ideal only. Lennox generates a balance between “the real and the ideal” by showing Henrietta make mistakes (real) and turn those into prudence (ideal) through her learning and reflection. Lennox’s narrative also exposes the entrapments of arranged marriages for financial gain by using Henrietta’s coming of age story to establish a new societal norm where young women accomplish a full life without forsaking their beliefs. Indeed, while living the daring life of an independent and adventurous young woman, Henrietta escapes arranged marriage or life in a nunnery, accepts work as a housemaid, survives betrayals by friends, and finds true love. As a whole, Henrietta practices a high standard of prudence. Still, if the heroine’s beginnings as a teenage runaway seem morally ambiguous, readers must share Miss Woodby’s sentiment in what might be her singular moment of wisdom in the entire novel: “who would not fly from a bigot, a priest, and an old hideous lover?” (Lennox 80).

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