

Art Imitates Life: The Life & Novels of Anna Maria Bennett

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Preface

I first encountered Anna Maria Bennett's novels as part of a faculty-student research collaboration for Cambridge University Press. The research task involved locating and reading Bennett's seven multi-volume 18th century novels and compiling synopses, which included the identification of major themes, such as class issues, law, and romance. While reading these novels, I noticed they were far more than what George Eliot would later term "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists." Rather, I noticed prominent proto-feminist themes such as female self-sufficiency and the danger of male hegemony written into the texts.

This project developed into my honors project, which delves deeper into Bennett's life and experiences. Throughout my research I found that, though most authors write their lives into their works, not all do so as prominently as Bennett. As a female author during the 18th century, Bennett overcame her dependence on men early in her writing career. Her novels incorporate many major obstacles in her life including scandalous relationships, betrayal, and being a mother to illegitimate children. In *'Unfortunate Objects': London's Unmarried Mothers in the Eighteenth Century*, Tanya Evans suggests that male betrayal was prolific in 18th century London especially in terms of sexual encounters and pregnancy. She insists that, "Women had no or little control over their own fertility. Consequently, their sexual experiences were likely to lead to pregnancy and the birth of an unwanted infant" (137). Evans shows that men were likely responsible for sexual encounters with women, which led to a proliferation of fatherless children. She also claims that "Illegitimate pregnancy and birth usually followed a long list of misfortunes" (135). Evans notes that women of any marital status were unlikely to be able to financially provide for their children. By addressing these obstacles women had to overcome in

her novels, Bennett shows her concern for women and their place in society. In, *Wales as Nowhere: the Tabula Rasa of the 'Jacobin' Imagination*, Caroline Franklin argues that, by writing about her own social concerns, Bennett, “prepared the way for Charlotte Smith and Charles Dickens in using the novel of sentiment to evoke social concern for liberal causes” (23).

I. How the 18th Century Viewed Bennett and Other Female Authors

Because she addressed social and political concerns in her writing, Bennett can be viewed in direct opposition to Fanny Burney. In "Momentary Fame: Female Novelists in Eighteenth-Century Book Reviews," Laura Runge cites Burney as the author who “set the standard for novel achievement” during the 18th century (294). In book reviews, other female authors were often criticized in relation to Burney’s texts. In a critique of Charlotte Smith’s *The Young Philosopher*, the critic states, ““The best of our female novelists interferes not with church nor state. There are no politics in *Evelina* or *Cecilia*”” (Runge 294). Smith is directly compared to Burney and chastised for writing about politics. Runge adds, “The reviewer issues Burney a backward compliment; she clearly belongs among the best novel-writers - here, female novelists - but at the cost of eschewing certain worldly themes and events” and argues that Burney’s fame is directly related to her avoidance of important social and political concerns in her writing (Runge 294). In fact, Burney’s second novel, *Cecilia, or Memoirs of an Heiress* belongs to the novel of manners and follows a young upper class woman through her experiences in London high society. Rather than replicating writings, such as *Cecelia*, by upper class women who focused on aristocratic characters, Bennett wrote about her own social concerns by addressing issues of law and gender inequality the lower and middle class experienced. Perhaps even more impressive, though Bennett diverged from the “usual plots” and standards for novels at the time, she remained

extremely successful after her career began with her first novel, *Anna; Or Memoirs of a Welch Heiress*.

Burney and Bennett likely wrote about dramatically different subjects due to the difference in their financial status and their social experiences. Burney grew up in an upper class home; Jan Wellington notes that Burney wrote “On subjects ranging from court life to courtship... to a meeting with Napoleon” (Wellington). Because she was part of the upper-class, Burney’s inspiration for her texts is limited to upper class society and experiences. Novels gained popularity mostly due to the fact that they discuss situations that seem relevant to their readers. However, the only readers able to relate to Burney’s novels would have been upper class women. Therefore, Bennett’s popularity can possibly be attributed to her middle class status. Bennett’s themes of female vulnerability, male betrayal, and unfair treatment under the law would be far more relatable to middle class women. Bennett’s novels broke out of the accepted form: as Janet Todd notes, ““Since critics were clear about what and how women should write, the pressure to conform must have been immense”” (Udden 14). Bennett does, however, break the template of the usual novel written by women in the 18th century.

Prominent female authors during the 18th century primarily wrote instructional and moral texts. In *The Cambridge Companion to the 18th Century Novel* Richetti states that the ““novels’ come increasingly to share shelf space in the shops with religious and didactic texts” (6). When looking at literary criticism from the 18th century, it becomes very clear that male critics expected women to write only moral and instructional texts. For example, a review of Charlotte Lennox’s *Harriet Stuart* from 1761 criticized the work, stating, ““here are no striking characters, no interesting event, nor in short anything that will strongly fix the attention, or greatly improve the morals of the reader”” (Runge 284). Reviewers strongly criticized female authors when their

works did not fit the mold of didactic texts. From the novels at the time, critics had “a shared understanding of the features of the novel ... a moral of truth and instruction” (Runge 286). Similar to Lennox, Bennett was sharply criticized for her second book, *Juvenile Indiscretions*, which, according to critics, did not contain “propriety and decorum which we expect in a female’s conduct; there is a line, far on this side of indecency, which female gentleness should not step beyond” (Udden 51). Despite critical backlash concerning her “immoral” scenes, Bennett remained a successful author from the beginning of her career. Though Bennett breaks the mold of moral and didactic texts written by upper class women and about high class experiences, she remained a popular author in London and even appeared on Minerva’s Bestseller List.

For her first novel, *Anna; Or Memoirs of a Welch Heiress* (1785), Bennett possibly gathered inspiration from Aphra Behn’s success, who also earned a living through her writing. Despite other women writing at the same time as Bennett, such as Burney, Anna Laetitia Barbauld, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen, Bennett’s lack of literary foremothers possibly caused her to look back to Behn for inspiration. Behn’s first novel, *Oroonoko; or the Royal Slave*, reads without chapters or sections and though she does possibly draw from Behn, Bennett does separate her novels into multiple chapters and often uses formats such as epistolary or diary entries to further the plot. Letter writing or keeping a diary would have been very familiar to Bennett, as we have records of multiple letters she wrote to her lover/employer Admiral Thomas Pye, and it was not unusual for women in the 18th century to keep a daily journal or diary. As Darby Lewes notes in her work *Dream Revisionaries*, early female authors “needed no classical education and could frequently draw from journals, diaries, and letters - types of writing highly familiar to women” (11). By writing her texts in a form that would have been familiar to women

during the time of her publications, Bennett invites other women to read about her strong and dynamic heroines.

Bennett places herself within these novels through her heroines. As a single mother with two illegitimate children, Bennett supported her family through her writing. Though there were many other popular female novelists at the time, such as Burney and Hannah More, Bennett relied solely on her writing as a source of income. Virtually the only career for middle to upper middle-class women in the 18th century would be working in the domestic sphere, possibly as a governess.¹ As a novelist, Bennett could write from within the private sphere, which was perceived as the “proper space” for women.

II. How We View Bennett and Other 18th Century Female Authors

Though virtually all female authors showcase the prominence of didactic texts, Bennett changes the popular plots and characters in her novels. Instead of focusing on the patient Griselda figure or the passive Cinderella figure, Bennett showcases strong and dynamic heroines. *The Cambridge Companion to the 18th Century Novel* notes that “because they tell stories of familiar human situations... novels may sometimes seem ‘universal’” (Richetti 10). Bennett told authentic stories through her novels about female vulnerability, male betrayal, and financial hardships. By writing about personal experiences, she confronted women’s issues. In his article “Women as Readers and Writers,” Mark Towsey states that women contributed to the intellectual and literary discussions “by taking up the pen themselves, addressing the needs and desires of the reading community to which they belonged” (Towsey 34). Bennett likely saw an obligation to write more than moral, religious, or instructional texts. Instead she authored works that illustrated authenticity and realism from women’s middle class experiences.

¹ Until Florence Nightingale founded the profession of nursing for women around 1854, virtually all of women’s work had to take place within the domestic setting.

By writing about her own experiences, Bennett's texts reflect proto-feminist values, including her negative portrayal of husbands and fathers, female vulnerability, female financial independence, and the dangers of the public sphere for men and women alike. These themes all encompass concerns of early feminism and demonstrate issues Bennett was concerned about. Bennett was betrayed by her lover/employer, Sir Thomas Pye, which explains the predominantly pessimistic way in which she characterizes husbands and fathers in her novels. Her work features a proliferation of men who are unfaithful and deceptive, causing their wives to flee. For example, in *Vicissitudes Abroad, Or the Ghost of My Father*, the young Henrietta elopes to England with the scoundrel, St. Herman. After they are married and have a child, St. Herman reveals that he married her under a false name and also has another wife whom he married legally. After hearing this confession from St. Herman, Henrietta takes her illegitimate child and escapes to the country. Bennett showcases these runaway women as strong, dynamic individuals, rather than passive and submissive wives. When Pye acquired another mistress, Bennett left him and gained a career through writing in order to financially provide for herself and children. Bennett championed female financial independence in her work by contrasting her honorable heroines with greedy men. While many of her heroines seek financial independence through jobs such as teaching and embroidery, the majority of male characters are avaricious individuals who would rather steal than make an honest living. This theme is showcased in Bennett's first novel, *Anna; Or Memoirs of a Welch Heiress*. Reverend Dalton is a greedy member of the clergy who steals from the young orphaned Anna. On the other hand, while attempting to support herself, the adult Anna obtains an embroidery job for the wealthy Desmoulin family. Anna is not the only character to seek financial independence. Rosa, in *The Beggar Girl and Her Benefactors* acquires a job teaching at her boarding school and in *Vicissitudes Abroad; Or the Ghost of My*

Father, Adelaide is hired as a governess. Bennett and her heroines all reflect the importance of female self-sufficiency.

Another trope Bennett uses to showcase proto-feminist values and refute popular ideas of the time is the way in which she examines the dichotomy of the public versus private sphere. Bennett, like her heroines, chose to maintain a career to support her family and she was able to do so from within the domestic sphere. She writes about young women who leave the domestic sphere, venture into the city, and are often exposed to hazards and pitfalls. In *Ellen; Countess of Castle Howel*, Ellen successfully gambles away most of her husband's fortune in London. Lastly, in *Agnes DeCourci*, Agnes is almost killed in a house fire before she is rescued by her lover, Harley. Both heroines encounter a multitude of dangers in the public sphere and are only safe once they are returned to the domestic setting. However, Bennett shows that the city is not only filled with immoral temptations and physical dangers for women, but also for her male characters. In her novel, *De Valcourt*, Bennett showcases a young man who is corrupted by society. By showing both women and men succumbing to pitfalls in the public sphere, Bennett negates the idea that only women are susceptible to the dangers of public life.

Regarding Bennett's contribution to the novel, in Udden's *Veils of Irony: The Development of Narrative Technique in Women's Novels of the 1790s*, she uncovers criticism surrounding Bennett's novel, *The Beggar Girl and Her Benefactors*. At the time of publication, *The Beggar Girl and Her Benefactors* was

“a record length of seven volumes... a record even for its publisher, the Minerva Press, which was notorious for its three- to five-decker novels... Contemporary critics, however, well aware of the financial considerations, criticised Bennett's fiction for its length, its many digressions, and its overly intricate plot. They appreciated her, on the

other hand, above all for her rich gallery of characters” (23).

But, Udden points out that “Perhaps the weight of her contribution to the novel was not seen until the early nineteenth century when Coleridge expressed his appreciation of her work and compared her with Fielding” (24). Though Bennett received sharp criticism for her novels during her lifetime, her talent and contribution to the novel was eventually recognized by other prominent authors. Her obituary in *The Athenaeum* also “equated her talent with that of Henry Fielding or Richardson” (Lewes).

By diverting from the accepted form of the novel, Bennett was able to weave her social critiques into her novels. Though she received sharp criticism for writing about subjects other than the patient Griselda and passive Cinderella figures, Bennett remained a prominent and popular writer in the 18th century.

Biography

Anna Maria Bennett (sometimes referred to as Agnes Maria Bennett) was a Welsh novelist born in Merthyr Tydvil in Glamorganshire, a town in southeast Wales around 1750. She married Thomas (or John Bennett) of Tooting, Surrey. After moving from Wales to London with her husband, Bennett left him in favor of a relationship with Sir Thomas Pye (Shattock 37). Between 1762 and 1765, she served as Pye's mistress and housekeeper (where she would stay for 16 years). In 1765 Bennett gave birth to their first child, Harriet Pye Bennett. Shortly after Harriet, Bennett gave birth to a son, Thomas Pye Bennett, who would go on to become a "worthy young officer in the navy" (Theatrical Journal). When Harriet was nineteen years old she married James Esten, with the consent of her mother, at the Church of Lower Tooting, Graveney, Surrey on February 24, 1784. Shortly after her daughter's marriage, Bennett abruptly ended her relationship with Sir Thomas Pye because she found a stray letter from him addressed to another mistress.

After their turbulent relationship Bennett published her first novel *Anna; Or Memoirs of a Welch Heiress* in 1785, which was dedicated to the Princess Royal. *Anna* was wildly successful and sold out on the first day of publication. Shortly after *Anna* was published Sir Thomas Pye died on December 26, 1785 on Suffolk Street in London, leaving Bennett his house in the London suburbs. Before his death, however, Bennett and Pye exchanged a series of dramatic letters. In one particular letter, Bennett threatened to blackmail Pye if he did not promise to provide for her and their children.

Harriet's acting career began, with her debut as Alicia in *Jane Shore* on June 19, 1786. Later that year Harriet also played Letitia Hardy in *The Belle's Stratagem* and premiered at a theatre in Bath in the role of Letitia Hardy. Soon after her success in Bath, Harriet and James

Esten moved to Dublin where Harriet performed at the Smock Alley Theatre. Following her success in Dublin, in 1789 Harriet obtained a deed of separation from James Esten. After Harriet and James separated, she became the mistress of the Duke of Hamilton while continuing her career on the stage. On January 19, 1790 Harriet made her debut as Juliet at the Edinburgh Theatre where she became a lasting favorite among the public. In the summer of 1792 Mrs. Harriet Esten won the lease of the Edinburgh theatre, after winning the lease Harriet left the responsibilities of management to her mother while Harriet played her third season at Covent Garden. On July 20, 1793 Harriet gave up the lease to the Edinburgh theatre to Stephen Kemble. Around 1793-94 Harriet performed in her final season at Covent Garden. Even though Harriet was previously in a relationship with the Duke of Hamilton, her divorce from James Esten was not finalized until July 4, 1797 in the Consistory Court of the Bishop of London. On August 1, 1799 the Duke of Hamilton died, and left Harriet three thousand pounds (Highfill).

In the midst of her daughter's theatrical success, Bennett published *Juvenile Indiscretions* in 1786. Later, in 1789, she published *Agnes DeCourci: A Domestic Tale*. It wasn't until 1794 that she published *Ellen; Countess of Castle Howel*. Four days after her daughter's divorce, Bennett published *The Beggar Girl and her Benefactors*. This novel, similar to *Anna; Or Memoirs of a Welch Heiress*, was quite popular and appeared on Minerva's Bestseller List of 1798. The next year, Bennett published *De Valcourt*. It was not until after *De Valcourt* was published that *Anna; Or Memoirs of a Welch Heiress* went into four editions. Bennett's last text *Vicissitudes Abroad; Or the Ghost of my Father* was published in April, 1806 and sold 2,000 copies on the first day of publication (Aaron 28). Two years after the publication of *Vicissitudes Abroad; or Ghost of my Father* both Bennett and her son died. Bennett died on February 12, 1808 in Brighton, Sussex and her obituary appeared in *The Athenaeum*, which equated her talent

with that of Fielding or Richardson. Among other high praise for Bennett, Margaret Anne Doody compares her talent with that of Jane Austen, stating, ““We can find a touch of *Agnes DeCourci* seriously assimilated in *Emma*” (Westall, “Labours of Love”). Her work was also admired by Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Mary Wollstonecraft (Aaron).

Synopses

Title: *Anna; or Memoirs of a Welch Heiress*

Subtitle: *Interspersed with Anecdotes of a Nabob. A novel in two volumes by Mrs. Bennett*

Date of First Publication: 1785

Bennett's first novel, *Anna: or Memoirs of a Welch Heiress*, shows the unevenness often associated with period writing in general and inexperienced writers in particular: it is episodic, it features two-dimensional characters who are either impossibly noble or dastardly, and it employs convoluted Cinderella/Patient Griselda plots that hinge on accidents and misunderstandings. Yet, possibly thanks to its plucky heroine whose courageous attempts to survive in a hostile world bear a resemblance to those of her author, it sold out on the first day of publication.

Anna opens on an aptly named "Scene of Mortality": a gentleman brings his daughter and her ailing nurse into rented lodgings, goes out to look for an apothecary, and dies of a stroke. After learning of his death, the nurse also dies. The reverend Dalton and his wife adopt the child—who has no possessions except for a small trunk, which Dalton adopts as well—into their already considerable family, and he pays for the funerals of the father and nurse. Yet his motives are far from pure. The trunk, he has discovered, contains a fortune of fourteen hundred guineas, which he secretly appropriates for his own use, rationalizing that it will be payment for the good care he gives the child.

Anna and the Dalton's daughters are sent to school, where Anna proves herself intelligent and diligent, and grows into a lovely child. Her life takes a turn, however, when she is accidentally hit by a carriage owned by the wealthy Mrs. Melmont, who takes such a great liking to Anna that she adopts her and takes her to a lovely country home, where she becomes a

cherished member of the household, treated like the child of wealth and privilege she has become until her twelfth birthday.

Unfortunately, Mr. Melmont's carelessness with money has left the family in dire financial straits that necessitate the dismissal of the servants, including Anna's beloved Welsh governess, Miss Mancel, and the tutors. Although she tries to be helpful, her situation is aggravated by the visit of Melmont's friend, Colonel Gorget. He is the first of the many men who plague Anna with their unwanted (and immoral) attentions, and then, when she rejects them, spread wicked rumors about her. When his attempted rape of Anna fails, he convinces the ailing Mrs. Melmont that Anna is fundamentally immoral and that her unhealthy influence on the household demands her banishment. He then seals his argument with a twenty-pound bribe.

Anna is taken in by her old governess, who lives in Wales with her brother, and becomes a cherished member of the household and local society. She is befriended by the wealthy Herberts of Llandore Castle and their eldest son, the noble and high-minded Charles; and the Edwins of Dennis Place and their eldest son, the lascivious and unhappily married, Hugh.

When her old governess dies as a result of a fall, Anna finds a new home with Lady Edwin, who asks her to stay in her London town house as a companion to her daughter Cecelia, a vain young woman who envies Anna's beauty and grace. There, Anna suffers the unwanted attentions of the elderly lecher Lord Sutton and of Lady Edwin's son Hugh. She also is reunited with Charles, and learns that he is engaged to Cecilia, who spreads false rumors and scandalous gossip. Anna is branded a thief, liar, and ambitious gold-digger; Charles doubts the rumors, but avoids Anna since he considers himself honor-bound to wed Cecilia. The scandal forces Anna to leave the Edwin's house and return to the Daltons, who demand payment for raising her and threaten a lawsuit. Fearing that she will be sent to debtor's prison, she escapes secretly. Her cab

is overturned, and an unconscious Anna is taken in by the kindly Mrs. Hughes. Anna reaches what seems to be the nadir of her life when—poor, friendless, and financially ruined—she contracts smallpox.

Yet things get even worse. Mrs. Hughes' brother is one of the Edwins' servants and recognizing Anna during a family visit, he tells his employer of her whereabouts. Hugh Edwin goes to the Daltons' and has her possessions sent to him. This leads to rumors that she eloped from the Dalton house and is currently Edwin's mistress.

Anna recovers, her beauty unmarred by the smallpox, and finds well-paid employment as an embroiderer for the Desmoulins. But her brief happiness is soon destroyed: first, she learns that Charles has died; then, Edwin has Bates steal the expensive embroideries that she has been working on. The Desmoulins have her arrested for fraud and theft—adding yet more scandal to her already sullied reputation. Anna is about to be taken to prison when two men arrive to save the day.

They are her vastly wealthy brother and uncle, who inform her that she is the long-lost heir to the Trevanion fortune and, as Lady Edwin's niece, will inherit her fortune as well. The truth of Dalton's theft of the box of guineas comes out, as do all the false rumors about Anna's character. Anna now takes her rightful place in society and is predictably gracious and forgiving to all those who treated her badly. She marries Charles—who of course, is not dead at all—and lives happily, beloved by all.

Title: *Juvenile indiscretions*

Subtitle: *A novel. In five volumes. By the author of Anna, or the Welch heiress*

Date of First Publication: 1786

A five-volume romance, *Juvenile Discretions* is a sometimes uneven mix of the genre of sentimental fiction and satire: it employs the semi-obligatory convoluted plots, outrageous coincidences, and apparently low-born protagonists who wind up having a noble parentage; and mockery of contemporary education, hypocrisy, the English judicial systems, medical care, primogeniture, and religious excess.

The widowed Henrietta Dellmore had been promised a substantial income from her father-in-law as long as her son Henry survives. Unfortunately, the baby died of smallpox while he was in France with his mother. In order to retain her income, she had her brother kidnap a replacement infant, whom she brought back to England and passed off as her son. The replacement Henry, a paragon of virtue and intelligence, was the star pupil at his school, but the ruse was discovered. As the novel opens, Henry Dellmore is now the sullen “Mumps,” the school dogsbody, a servant dressed in rags, and cruelly mocked by all. The kindly Mr. Franklin decides to adopt the boy and takes him to Ether Vale, his estate maintained by the pompous, greedy cleric Dr. Orthodox, his wife, and their daughters. Henry must leave behind his beloved Clara Elton, a beautiful orphan heiress.

At Ether Vale, he finds himself caught up in a love triangle reminiscent of *Tom Jones*: he loves Clara, but is susceptible to Orthodox’s daughter Lavina, and is pursued by Franklin’s sister, a forty-year-old spinster. Lavina boasts that she is engaged to Henry; Clara hears the rumor, and broken-hearted, runs away. After surviving several misadventures, including a hairsbreadth escape from a false marriage to a fortune hunter, Clara vows to end her “juvenile

indiscretions,” and returns to Ether Vale, where she learns that Henry, distraught over her disappearance, has left for London.

There he meets an old schoolfellow who spreads false accusations that Henry is a liar, a thief, and a libertine, resulting in his being arrested for assault and debt. When free, a despairing Henry leaves England for the East Indies. En route, however, he learns that Mr. Franklin still believes in him and sails home on the first available ship. On the return trip, he meets the mysterious and wealthy widow Mrs. Nesbit, once a great beauty but now disfigured by the ravages of smallpox.

His second trip to London echoes the first: once again, he meets a schoolfellow who publicly declares Henry a swindler and a rascal who only pretends to have a fortune. Once again, he is imprisoned for assault and debt. This time, however, he becomes seriously ill. He is robbed of all his possessions and is about to be forcibly bled by a quack doctor when he is rescued by a passing physician who hears his cries.

Clara, also ill from her harrowing adventures, is taken to a spa by Mr. Franklin, where they hear a story about an American Quaker who secretly married a British soldier during the French and Indian war. The soldier died in battle, leaving a son who was sent to be raised by a French family, but the child was kidnapped. The mother of the slain soldier, the aristocratic Lady Belvoir, inquired about the boy, but received no reply.

Eventually, it is discovered that Mrs. Nesbit is the former Henrietta Dellmore, who had substituted the kidnapped Henry for her dead son. Henry, in turn, is revealed to be Lady Belvoir’s grandson who, now more properly styled Augustus, will inherit his father’s title and fortune. Henry and Clara are married in grand style.

Title: *Agnes DeCourci*

Subtitle: *A Domestic Tale*

Date of First Publication: 1789

Bennet's third novel uses the highly marketable technique of presenting titillating and for the most part unmentionable themes (kept women, extramarital sex, incest, lechery—even an excommunicated runaway nun)—in a respectable and virtuous story which would not offend even the most delicate sensibilities. The fact that the eponymous heroine emerges unscathed may reflect the scandal that surrounded Bennett for many years as a result of her rather unconventional lifestyle. Like many of Bennet's novels, it refers to the Jacobite uprising of 1745, and employs one of her favorite theme: innocent children whose lives are ruined by the actions of their irresponsible—and frequently immoral--forebears.

General Moncrass, the highly respectable husband of the equally respectable Lady Mary is the subject of a terrible scandal: he has been supporting the beautiful Agnes DeCourci, who is generally supposed to be his mistress. Suspicious, Lady Mary sends a servant to spy on the general while he is in London. After finding out about the affair Lady Mary boldly confronts her husband, but he does not reveal anything. After the general's prolonged silence on the matter of infidelity, Lady Mary leaves him, taking her daughter with her. He sends his wife a letter professing his love and honor—but does not explain his “bauble,” and continues to live apart from his wife, despite the pleas of his friends and misery of his family.

At a dinner party, he is introduced to Edward Harley, an amiable young pacifist who has been profoundly influenced by Rousseau and who seeks to use his very small fortune to live a simple life in tune with the harmonies of Nature, outside the norms and constraints of society. Harley is favorably impressed by the General's nobility. He also is introduced to Agnes DeCourci, and admires her beauty, intelligence, and elegant simplicity. He notes that the

General dotes on the girl—albeit seemingly with “the fondness of a tender father,” rather than the passion of a lover--and wonders how such honorable people could sacrifice their virtue for mere sexual gratification.

Eventually, Harley falls love with Agnes. His friends are appalled that the young man has apparently become the prey of a *femme fatale*, and point out that a relationship with Agnes would be an insult to the General and would impugn Harley’s own honor. Harley, however, is convinced that he cannot be happy without Agnes, and confesses his adoration to her; she rejects his love but hopes that they will remain friends. He realizes that their union is hopeless, and to avoid her seeks a military commission that will send him as far away as possible. He cannot come to terms with his passion, however: when the commission is not immediately forthcoming, he considers suicide; when it does arrive, he declines it, and finally decides that he must beg Agnes to marry him and repudiate the general. She is shocked by his declarations and flees, leaving no trace. Moncrass’ attempts to find her are futile. Harley is thrilled that she might have abandoned the General, but deeply concerned about her well-being.

Of course, Agnes is not the General’s mistress, but rather the daughter of his twin sister who, when the Catholic family encountered financial losses brought about by their loyalty to the Jacobites, entered a convent, and then later eloped with the scoundrel Douglas Neville. Their daughter Agnes was also reared in a French convent: like her mother, she chose to leave it; but unlike her, did so with her virtue intact. Harley searches exhaustively for Agnes, attempting to trace her in the neighboring villages. Like everyone else, he fears that she will be unable to survive on her own.

His fears are well grounded. He discovers Agnes trapped in a burning building. She had been waiting to arrange a passage to Europe in order to return to the convent in which she was

reared and to the Abbess who befriended her. Although nearly killed in the attempt, Harley manages to rescue Agnes. He begs Agnes to remain in England, but she is adamant until she hears that the Abbess wishes her to return to Moncrass, who is dangerously ill. The General is relieved to see them both and gives his blessing on their marriage.

The Abbess forwards a posthumous letter from Agnes' mother, St. Clare, written just before her death, which reveals the history of her elopement with Mr. Douglas, a scoundrel who married her under a false name; he was legally James Neville. After she had their child, he abandoned her in favor of his legal wife. Agnes is saddened but proud of her mother's strength.

Her wedding is a joyous event with feasting and parties held throughout the county. Before the marriage can be consummated, however, a letter arrives from Harley's sister with the terrible news that Harley is actually James Neville's illegitimate son who was adopted by their family. He and his new wife are half-siblings.

Devastated, Agnes plans to return to the convent while Harley runs away. Agnes stays to search for Harley, who is found dead in a river. Agnes prays to God to grant him mercy, then dies of a broken heart. Her body is returned to the convent, where the Abbess decrees that her name shall never be spoken, although she does hope that if Agnes' story is ever told, it will be by "some humane being who will drop a sympathetic tear to the memory of the dead" and conceal the true identities of the principals.

Title: *Ellen, Countess of Castle Howel*

Subtitle: *A Novel in four volumes*

Date of First Publication: 1796

Ellen was written during the height of Bennett's legal battle over the lease of the Edinburgh Theatre she had taken over in 1793 and she credited writing the book with saving her from "Mental Derangement." Certainly, the novel features a good deal of legal wrangling, as well as a May/December marriage reminiscent of her turbulent relationship with the elderly nobleman Thomas Pye.

Ellen Meredith is the beautiful orphaned granddaughter of Sir Arthur and Lady Meredith, an impecunious couple whose rural North Welsh estate is deeply in debt to the avaricious Mr. Morgan. Their neighbor is Lord Howel, a kind and generous man who, enchanted by Ellen's beauty and grace, has offered to marry her. Lady Meredith and Sir Arthur consider Ellen's lack of wealth and marital prospects and agree to the scheme, as does Ellen, grateful for Lord Howel's kindness and generous offer to pay the Merediths' debts.

In London, lonely and unfulfilled by her elderly spouse, the naïve Countess finds herself caught up in the artifice of city life with no true advisor to help her negotiate the perils of fashionable society and surrounded by herds of sycophants and hangers-on attracted to her wealth and position. Her natural simplicity gives way to London vices, especially gambling. When her losses become so excessive that the debt exceeds her husband's considerable income, he demands she stop. Unfortunately, the lecherous Lord Claverton and the libertine Lord Charles Dash are perfectly willing to loan her money. Naively believing that her innocence and her husband's honor will protect her, Ellen accepts more and more "loans," and is surrounded by gossip and ugly rumors that develop into outright scandal. When her two creditors, each

convinced that he now controls her, fight a duel over her, Claverton is left near death and Dash flees to Europe.

Ellen's reputation is on the brink of ruin. When her husband receives from an anonymous source a ledger of Ellen's gaming, he is devastated by this apparent evidence of her deceit and lack of character. Worst of all, Ellen is pregnant and since the paternity is in doubt, the child may be taken from her at birth to be reared by her husband. One of her few local champions is her true love, the country cleric, Percival Evelyn.

Ellen flees to her grandparents' home, where she accidentally meets Percival during a walk in the forest with her servant. A storm approaches and the three take shelter in a house together where Percival confesses his undying love. She gives birth to a baby boy and fears that he will be taken away. But once Lord Howel learns that neither the wicked Dash nor the now-repentant Claverton had succeeded in compromising Ellen's virtue, he believes that she has been maligned and sets about to restore her good name.

Percival, giving up all hopes of a union with Ellen, plans to marry Jane Runnington, a sweet orphan. Ellen is at first distressed, but eventually accepts that she no longer has any right to love the young cleric. He leaves for Ireland to marry his fiancée and Ellen devotes herself fully to her loving and forgiving husband.

At Christmas, however, Lord Howell dies in a riding accident. Ellen learns that he died insolvent and that she may be accused of fraud and her son denied his rightful title. In addition, Mr. Morgan asserts that Lord Howel never paid the mortgage on her grandparents' estate: since no documents to the contrary can be found, the Merediths are now being evicted. Ellen goes to London, hoping to clear matters up. She learns from Lord Howel's banker that all but four hundred pounds had been withdrawn from Lord Howel's account by his sister, Lady Margaret.

Percival then arrives and confesses that he was never in love with Jane and had not finally married her. Distressed by Ellen's situation, he pledges his devoted service to her, knowing that a penniless man cannot hope for a union with a Countess.

Lord Howell's London possessions are sold at auction to pay his outstanding debts. The dastardly Mr. Morgan, in attendance, buys a heavy iron chest after spirited bidding, paying at least five times its value. When he opens the chest and looks inside, the weighty cover falls and crushes his arm. A surgeon is called and Percival helps care for Mr. Morgan, who is deeply touched by his concern.

The iron chest, mysteriously lost, is subsequently discovered in the possession of Lady Margaret. Its hidden compartment holds twenty thousand pounds and the receipt for payment of the Merediths' mortgage. The mystery is solved: Lady Margaret handled the Earl's finances and, instead of paying his debts, embezzled the funds and invested them. She had secreted most of her profits—money that rightfully belonged to Ellen and her son—in the chest.

Percival receives equally happy news: he is the heir to not one, but three fortunes: Mr. Morgan has left the cleric his vast estate; a mysterious locket containing Lord Claverton's miniature proves that Percival is actually Claverton's son and will inherit his title and fortune; Ellen's uncle Mr. Meredith also plans to leave him a portion of his estate. Ellen and Percival (rechristened Horatio Claverton) marry and live happily, beloved, admired, and respected by all.

Title: *The Beggar Girl and Her Benefactors*

Subtitle: *A novel in five volumes by Mrs. Bennett*

Date of First Publication: 1797

Bennett's satire on eighteenth-century novels employs the genre's semi-requisite hairbreadth escapes, difficulties, and dangers, of which her plucky heroine, whose true identity is discovered by a fortuitous birthmark, is a likeable survivor. There is a good deal of self-reflexive humor, as evidenced in the chapter headings, "The Long Story," "The Long Story Continued," and "No End to the Long Story." Bennett's often bewildering use of myriad minor characters and her sharp contrasts between the life of the upper and lower classes can be seen to anticipate Charles Dickens's fiction.

Rosa Wilkens, a penniless beggar abandoned by her alcoholic mother, is taken in by the gruff Colonel Wallace Buhannun. After a bath (which reveals her unusually soft and delicate skin, as well as an odd mark on her arm that will later help reveal her true parentage), clean clothing, and four days of medical treatment and good food, her appearance has so improved that he does not at first recognize her. A bit of kindness has also brought out her natural sweetness, as well as her desire to please. She has been transformed into an ideal child and her miserable existence into happy domesticity.

But the idyllic situation does not last, for a short while after she has become a fixture in the household, Buhannun is called to duty in India to serve his country and, accompanied by his friend Littleton, leaves. Rosa is sent to a fashionable boarding school, where the girl's sunny disposition and modest behavior, combined with her intelligence and diligence, soon make her a school favorite. Word arrives, however, that the Colonel died while fighting in India, leaving no will and thus no maintenance for his ward. To support herself, she takes a teaching position at the school.

The Colonel's closest relative Major Buhanun arrives and insists that she comes to live with him and his family in the country in Scotland. Rosa is happy here until the Major falls ill and dies. After this, she is treated badly by his wife—who is concerned that Rosa's great beauty will limit the prospects of her own daughter-- and resolves to return to London, travelling under the name of Miss Walsingham to escape unwanted attentions.

The journey is interrupted when Rosa becomes ill and is befriended by the mysterious Mrs. Garnet, who, although obviously “vulgar and low bred,” is very kind to Rosa and sees to her care. Later, when Mrs. Garnet gets drunk and lies in an alcoholic stupor, Rosa learns to her horror that the woman is her mother. But when a carriage accident leaves Garnet very ill, Rosa's revulsion is eclipsed by her daughterly instincts, and she is a faithful nurse. Enter the generous and honorable Horace Montreville, who is immediately smitten by her beauty, fine character, and intelligence. He is irritated, however, when she seems to prefer the company of an uncouth drunken invalid to his own. Yet despite several misunderstandings and miscommunications, he is ultimately convinced of her goodness and worth and proposes. Rosa loves him as well; however, she recognizes the vast disparity in their social positions. When she learns that his parents have engaged him to another woman (whom he has never met) she decides to secretly continue her trip to London.

Rosa accepts a position as a companion to the aging social butterfly Mrs. Woudbe and enters what appears to be an ideal world of magnificent libraries, gala masquerade balls, and beautiful women bedecked in jewels and rich gowns. Alas, beneath the magnificence lies a nightmarish reality of hypocrisy, cruelty, deceit and debt. Those she considers her friends turn on her, and when she is reunited with Montreville, he is first distant to the point of being offensive, and later accosts her and charges her with deception and cruelty. Her poverty and low

beginnings are revealed by supposed friends, who accuse her of dishonesty, ingratitude, and selfishness. Rosa first sinks into a crippling depression and then takes refuge with her school friend Elinor and her mother, the widowed Lady Denningcourt. They treat her as a family member—which, it turns out, she actually is. Her remarkable resemblance to the countess and her old friend Colonel Buhanun leads to series of conversations that gradually reveal her true parentage and ultimately resolve the novel's accumulated mysteries.

Nothing, apparently, is actually what it seems. Buhanun is not dead: he was wounded, carried away by the enemy and locked in a dungeon. Horace is actually Buhanun's young friend Littleton, and is still desperately in love with Rosa and ashamed of his willingness to believe the worst of her. Rosa is identified by the mark on her arm as the legitimate daughter of Lady Denningcourt and Wallace Buhanun, while Elinor turns out to be the love child of Lord Denningcourt and his mistress, Mrs. Garnet. Now the heir to two fortunes with an impeccable pedigree, Rosa will marry Horace Montreville and, one presumes, live happily ever after.

Title: *De Valcourt*

Subtitle: *A novel, in two volumes by Mrs. Bennett*

Date of First Publication: 1800

Bennett's penultimate novel introduces the selfish Earl of Mountshannon, who has married his beautiful wife for her immense wealth. He lives at court; his unhappy wife in her ancestral castle with her daughter Matilda and son, Mountford. When the Earl's excesses prove expensive, he tries to raid his wife's estate, and threatens her when she refuses his demands.

One evening, Matilda discovers the injured De Valcourt in a cave near the ocean and brings him to the castle. He is the only living descendant of a noble family loyal to Charles I who escaped Cromwell's army by taking refuge with a French cousin. When that cousin died, he left De Valcourt his estate. There was, however, another claimant; accompanied by his cousin's friend Beaumont, De Valcourt travelled to Paris to await the court's determination. There, he fell prey to a seductress, began gambling, lost the lawsuit, and wound up in prison. Rescued by Beaumont, he boarded a ship for England, fell overboard, smashed his head against a rock, was washed ashore, and stumbled into the cave from which Matilda rescued him. The Mountshannons insist that he remain with them.

Sir Charles Ormond arrives at the castle. He is charming, entertaining, and smitten with Matilda, whom De Valcourt also loves and who loves him in return. Lady Mountshannon is uncertain about their relationship and sends De Valcourt to London to attempt to recover his title, a requisite for Lord Mountshannon's permission to wed his daughter.

De Valcourt obeys her wishes. After he leaves, a letter arrives from Lord Mountshannon, begging his wife to forgive his past failings and permit him to stay at the castle for Christmas. Lady Mountshannon doubts his sincerity, but agrees to the visit. He arrives, accompanied by Sir Charles Ormand and the Viscount Mandeville, who make unwanted advances upon Matilda.

De Valcourt returns and the lovers vow eternal devotion. Lady Mountshannon promises that they will marry. Sir Charles's father arrives from France; he has been awarded an embassy position at Court and invites his son and young Mountford to accompany him. Sir Charles, no longer pursuing Matilda and wishing to escape his father's supervision, agrees.

After they depart, Lord Mountshannon orders Matilda to marry the Viscount and threatens severe punishment should she disobey. After Lady Mountshannon supports Matilda's engagement to De Valcourt, she is discovered in a coma. An unfamiliar doctor is called and sends her to an unknown destination for "a change of air." When Matilda adamantly refuses to marry Viscount Mandeville, she is secretly sent to a convent in France. Aided by a noblewoman who is boarding at the convent and believes her story of paternal treachery, Matilda escapes to Switzerland and stays with a peasant family. There, she writes letters to De Valcourt and her brother, but when she asks the pregnant peasant girl Jannette to have it sent, the girl examines the address and is visibly upset. Matilda subsequently discovers a familiar copy of Shakespeare that she and De Valcourt had read and annotated. Jannette explains that the book belongs to her unborn child's father, who abandoned her. Heartbroken, Matilda returns with the girl to England and seeks the protection of Sir Charles Ormond. The journey is difficult and as soon as they land, Jannette goes into premature labor and delivers a son, whom she names Horatio de Valcourt. As the mother and child rest, Matilda explores the surrounding countryside, happens upon a mansion belonging to her father, and learns that her mother is imprisoned there.

De Valcourt, having heard of Matilda's arrival, arrives and embraces her with joy. She berates him for his cruel treatment of Jannette. He denies ever knowing a Jannette, and, when shown the volume of Shakespeare, swears that he lost the book in France. Desperate to believe

him, but still suspicious, Matilda agrees to allow him to confront Jannette, who says that he is not the man who called himself De Valcourt.

Mountford arrives, and he and De Valcourt rescue a very weak and barely recognizable Lady Mountshannon. Ormond arrives, sees Janette, and explains that he assumed that name of De Valcourt in France to avoid his father's control. He had stolen the volume of Shakespeare from De Valcourt because it contained Matilda's handwritten notes.

In a compendium of happy endings, Jannette and Sir Charles Ormond plan to marry; Lord Mountshannon, overcome by the enormity of his sins and overwhelmed by his family's forgiveness, shuts himself away from the world to do penance; and Lady Mountshannon regains her health. Beaumont settles a small estate on De Valcourt and makes him his heir. De Valcourt marries Matilda and they live quietly and happily, beloved by all.

Title: *Vicissitudes Abroad; Or the Ghost of My Father,*

Subtitle: *A Novel in six volumes*

Date of First Publication: 1806

Bennett's final novel is perhaps her most mature in character, plot, and scope. It was also one of her most successful, reportedly selling over 2,000 copies on its first day of publication, despite reviews that lambasted its "bombastic inanity" and "vicious language." Set during the French Revolution, the novel traces the history of four families: the Dunbartons, an old Scots family fallen from grace; the De Varencourts, French aristocrats personifying nobility; the De Courvilles, dominated by a cruel and immoral Count; and the Chevereux, a *nouveau riche* middle-class family hoping to use their daughter to break into aristocratic circles.

The narrator, the motherless Henrietta Dunbarton, is taken under the protection of the wealthy De Varencourt family and reared with their own daughter, Julia. Naïve Henrietta foolishly elopes to England with a scoundrel and has two children: a son, who mysteriously disappears, and a daughter. He later abandons them, forcing her return to Paris. Julia, also makes a poor choice: she rejects her noble cousin, the Duke de Varencourt, in favor of the libertine Marquis de Courville, who in turn, jilts her in favor of Annette, a beautiful German girl. Julia, sadder but wiser, marries the Duke.

Henrietta's daughter Charlotte, the Marquis' German daughter Adelaide, and the Chevereux' daughter Ninon reside in a convent school for young noblewomen. Although Charlotte mocks Ninon and encourages her amusing gaffes, the good-natured girl tries to improve herself. Adelaide is deeply in love with her fiancé Louis, the eldest of the Duke's sons by a previous marriage, while Charlotte is to wed the younger brother Phillip, who secretly desires Adelaide.

Charlotte and Phillip play a cruel joke: they persuade Ninon that Louis is secretly in love with her, then convince him that Ninon needs attention. He treats her kindly; she takes his civility for romance. When he must join his regiment, the Duke and Duchess arrange marriage contracts for Louis and Ninon and for Philip and Adelaide. The devastated Adelaide sinks into a temporary depression. When Phillip reveals the “jest” to Ninon, she is understandably upset, but behaves nobly, swearing to resign any claim to Louis, to apologize to Adelaide, and to reconcile her father to a dissolution of the engagement.

All is in chaos as the Revolution begins. The Duke’s palace is destroyed and he dies of a fit brought on by Phillip’s wickedness. The Marquis De Courville is slain by a mob. The Chevereux family find themselves at risk as the Jacobins gain power. Phillip renews his plots against Louis and Adelaide, then threatens his brother’s life in a drunken rage. He is disowned, and joins the Jacobins.

Louis is entrusted with the dangerous task of riding ahead to set up the escape route for the royal family. Phillip (now called Charles) spies on Louis and reveals the plot to the National Guard. Henrietta and Charlotte plan to leave France and hope to smuggle Adelaide out with them. Phillip betrays them as well. The plot to save the royal family is a failure, and Charles reveals that when Louis’ role in the escape was discovered, he was beaten to death and privately interred in a monastery.

The slaughter of the royalists begins. The King and Queen are moved to the safest rooms, along with Ninon. No one, however can locate the Marquise, who in the chaos has been kidnapped and taken to La Force prison. Henrietta wishes to go visit her, but is denied access by the guard. Adelaide then falls ill with smallpox, and her face is scarred. Charlotte has disappeared. The Palace is soon under attack once again and a soldier grabs Henrietta and tells

her that he is going to save her. When she asks who he is, he responds that he is her long-lost husband. Harriet and Adelaide are taken to a safe house, where they learn that Monsieur and Madame Chevereux have been guillotined.

Henrietta and Adelaide reach England after a dangerous sea voyage. With no money, Adelaide accepts employment as a governess, but then disappears. Henrietta takes lodging with a kind widow, but is distraught at the loss of Adelaide and Charlotte. Later, she learns that Adelaide has supposedly run off to live in a brothel, while Charlotte and Ninon are apparently safe in Germany.

On a visit to Lord Castlebank, Henrietta sees a portrait of his elder brother, who strongly resembles Castlebank's adopted heir Mr. Somervine, a kindly man she met in Paris. The elder brother turns out to be Viscount Broughton, Baron Dunbar, her father. Charlotte finally arrives, accompanied by Ninon and Somervine, whom Henrietta realizes is her own long-lost son who had been kidnapped from his scoundrel father by Castlebank in order that he could be properly reared.

Somervine and Ninon are happily married at Lord Castlebank's house, and Adelaide is discovered to have been living at the house of the Marquise of Caterack under the protection of his noble sister. She has been extremely ill, and still suffers from convulsive seizures, but recovers when she is visited by Julia and Louis, who had not, in fact, as Phillip had reported, been killed. Louis marries Adelaide, Charlotte marries the repentant Charles, and everyone lives happily.

Synthesis

Development of Bennett's Heroines

Many of Anna Maria Bennett's novels involve heroines who, due to mistaken identities, move from lower-caste poverty to their rightful lives of wealth and privilege. Most novels follow this Cinderella plot where the heroines begin vulnerable and powerless, but end having agency over their lives. The novels that follow this form are *The Beggar Girl and Her Benefactors*, *Anna; Or Memoirs of a Welch Heiress*, *Ellen; Countess of Castle Howel*, and *Vicissitudes Abroad; Or the Ghost of My Father*. By examining the heroines in these novels and comparing them to the author's biographical details, it becomes clear that the Cinderella plot illustrated in the novels is mirrored in Bennett's and Harriet Pye Bennett's lives.²

Several characters mistaken for beggars and orphans are later discovered to be duchesses or countesses. For example, the young Anna in *Memoirs of a Welch Heiress* begins her story as a poor and abandoned orphan. As a young girl, she is dropped off at an inn and then her father and nurse both die. Similar to Anna, in the first chapter of *The Beggar Girl and Her Benefactors*, Rosa is introduced as "a little female mendicant" who begs on the streets in front of Colonel Buhanun's house (1; vol 1). In her fourth novel, *Ellen; Countess of Castle Howel*, Bennett writes about a lonely orphan lacking in marriage prospects and wealth. Lastly, in her final text, *Vicissitudes Abroad; or, the Ghost of my Father*, Bennett introduces Henrietta, who is orphaned and raised by the De Varencourt family.

² Not only do certain heroines go through this evolution, but there is also a main male character that goes through this process. In *De Valcourt: A novel, in two volumes*, De Valcourt begins his story as an injured man in a cave, but is revealed to be a descendant of a noble family. Similarly, Henry Dellmore in Bennett's *Juvenile Indiscretions*, also begins as a lowly servant, but by the end of the book inherits his father's title and wealth.

Once the characters' true identities are discovered, they are no longer vulnerable or powerless. Instead, the heroines are granted a domestic wish fulfillment in which they are kept safe within the private sphere. Specifically, in *Ellen; Countess of Castle Howel*, when Ellen is married, other characters rejoice, "Ellen, the pride, the darling of their hearts, would be secured from distress, and an earnest of the same security to themselves; she would be a Countess!" (22; vol. 2). Ellen begins the story as an orphan, but finishes the story as a countess. When Ellen is revealed as a countess and heir to a grand fortune, she becomes financially stable and safe within the domestic sphere. Once Ellen is granted with a title and financial stability, "Parties were proposed, and engagements made for the opera, plays and masquerades, all which places Ellen longed to be at" (61; vol. 2).

In *The Beggar Girl and Her Benefactors*, the young beggar is identified as a daughter of Lady Denningcourt. Rosa looks at Lady Denningcourt, who says,

'Yes, Rosa, I comprehend the interesting expression of your eye, - you are mine, - Wallace Buhanun, him in whose praise I have delighted to hear you eloquent; he is your father; - compose yourself... 'That you are mine, Rosa, I need no proof,' said the General; 'your resemblance to this your noble mother' (364; vol. 3).

In *The Beggar Girl and Her Benefactors* once Rosa's true lineage is discovered she is also placed as the heir to two fortunes and marries her love interest. Similar to Ellen and Rosa, in *Memoirs of a Welch Heiress*, Anna assumes her rightful place in society by the end of the book. Anna ends the novel with her husband, Charles, who

was generous, and because he was just; his wife, the fond choice of his early years, is yet the object of his adoration; her beauty, striking as it is, is her least attraction; and her high rank and affluent fortune creates not that respect, which is paid to her excellent heart

and refined understanding. Blest with the full gratification of their wished in the possession of each other... they yet live, and may they long do so, adored by each other, Venerated by their Children, Esteemed by their Friends, Beloved and honored by their Country (337; vol. 2).

Once the novels end, the heroines are beloved by the other characters and attain their rightful place in society.

Bennett and her daughter had something of a Cinderella plot on their own. Shortly after her relationship with Pye ended, Bennett's first novel, *Anna; Or Memoirs of a Welch Heiress*, was published. Though she did not achieve a title of Countess or Duchess, she became financially independent. Bennett's original incredibly scandalous situation with Pye and her two illegitimate children, ended with Bennet as a wildly successful author. Harriet Pye also enjoyed a Cinderella style development with her mother's help. Harriet led a wildly successful acting career, and performed many times at Covent Garden and the Edinburgh Theatre. Therefore, with her mother's help, Harriet was able to obtain and maintain fame as an actress.

These developments differ from what was seen in popular novels at the time. When compared with Fanny Burney, who is cited as the most popular female novelist at the time, Bennett's novels diverge from the accepted heroine development. Burney's *Cecelia* follows a young orphaned heiress who already has a small fortune of £10,000, and she will be rewarded with £3,000 more each year once she comes of age. Rather than being introduced in the novels as a woman with no status, Burney's heroine is granted status from the beginning. Though some of Burney's heroines are characterized as disadvantaged and must find their way on their own, they are not living in rags on the street. By leaving her heroines orphaned and without titles, Bennett

showcases lower and middle class life. These views of the lower classes are uncharacteristic within the 18th century novels.

Avoiding “The Devil’s Drawing Room”: A Woman’s Proper Place

A major theme in many of Bennett’s novels is the juxtaposition of the public versus private spheres. During Bennett’s lifetime, a woman’s proper place in society was safely couched within the domestic sphere. In *Agnes DeCourci* and *Ellen, Countess of Castle Howel*, Bennett shows the moral and physical dangers of city life. Not only does Bennett make females subject to the dangers of the city, but in *De Valcourt* she also introduces a male character who is corrupted by city life. By characterizing both female and male characters as easily sullied by city life, Bennett negates the assumption that only women are subject to hazards in the public sphere.

In *Agnes DeCourci*, Agnes hastily escapes to the city in fear of an impending marriage proposal. Her love interest, Edward Harley, searches tirelessly for her. Upon looking for Agnes near the shipyard Harley sees a house on fire and is informed that there is a young lady still in the house. With help from other men Harley enters the burning building and finds “a young person alive indeed, but in a strong convulsion fit.” With “not a moment to lose” he “caught her in [his] arms” (37-38; vol. 3). Upon rescuing Agnes, Harley is more enraptured with her than ever before. This instance in *Agnes DeCourci* illustrates the physical dangers when leaving the private sphere. It is only by sheer bad luck that Agnes is in the burning house and good luck that Harley found her in time. Up until this point in the novel Agnes has been taken care of and kept safe within her domestic sphere. It is not until she ventures out to escape a marriage proposal that she finds herself in trouble.

Clearly, the public world is full of hazards and pitfalls. In Bennett’s fourth novel, *Ellen; Countess of Castle Howel* the naive Ellen goes to the city and finds herself caught up in the world of gambling. At first she is lucky; “Ellen won the bank; this was the first moment she felt

an inclination to game, it was impossible not to be pleased at winning two thousand guineas, in so short a time” (78; vol. 2). She continues to win at the table. However, as time goes on her losses become increasingly frequent. Therefore, when she is informed by the Earl of Castle Howel that he cannot answer her constant monetary demands, “Thunder struck and amazed, [Ellen] turned pale, she had judged of the riches of her husband, by his liberality, and supposed one as inexhaustible as the other” (86; vol. 2). Ellen’s reckless gambling in London shows the moral dangers of the public sphere, as she gambled away most of her husband’s fortune. In the city Ellen is too easily corrupted and in danger of gambling away her husband’s entire fortune. In *Cambria Gothica (1780s–1820s)*, Jane Aaron notes that in *Ellen: Countess of Castle Howel*, Bennett depicts London as “that den of vice, the Devil’s drawing-room” (26). However, Bennett’s heroines are not the only characters subject to corruption in the big cities.

In her penultimate novel, *De Valcourt*, the main male character is subject to corruption and seduction in Paris. While in Paris to settle legal concerns, De Valcourt became acquainted with less than respectable company who introduce him to Signora Romanzie, a highly desirable harlot in Paris. De Valcourt quickly falls in love with her and “paid liberally for [his] entertainment, as [his] stock of ready cash was still pretty large” (115; vol. 1). However, soon enough, De Valcourt considers himself a “devoted slave” to Romanzie and finds himself deep in financial trouble. De Valcourt thinks to himself, “I found the little stock I could call my own, inadequate to satisfy [the creditors] demands. I had no resource now but by borrowing money at exorbitant interest (117; vol. 1). Not only is De Valcourt subject to an expensive prostitute, but he also falls into gambling. When introduced to gambling he quickly moves from “one day possessed of thousands, and the next penniless” (119; vol. 1). In the city, De Valcourt is negatively influenced by his friends who introduce him to prostitution and gambling.

By showing the dangers of the public sphere, Bennett likely reflects on her biggest mistake. In *The Oxford Guide to British Women Writers*, Joanne Shattock states that Bennett “left [her husband] after moving with him from Wales to London, worked in a chandler’s shop, and then became ‘housekeeper’ to the recently court-martialled Admiral Sir Thomas Pye” (37). Bennett experienced great turmoil once she ventured into the city. Her relationship with Pye turned sour after he cheated on her and therefore caused her to leave him and begin her career as a successful writer. Because she experienced pitfalls and dangers in the city, Bennett possibly uses these life experiences to create an authentic portrait of what she experienced.

Though the theme of corruption in the city could possibly be Bennett’s own reflection, by showing both men and women facing these vices, she also debunks the accepted truth that women belong in the private sphere. Because heroes and heroines are similarly affected by corruption, Bennett shows that both men and women are susceptible to the vices of city life. By showing De Valcourt succumbing to villainy, Bennett negates the idea that women are meant to be restrained within the private sphere.

Financial Independence

Historically, disadvantaged women seek a protector. Instead, Bennett's women are characterized as moral, hardworking individuals. In *Memoirs of a Welch Heiress*, Anna finds employment to end her dependence on the Dalton family. Rosa, in *The Beggar Girl and Her Benefactors* applies for a teaching position at her boarding school when faced with the loss of her sponsor. Lastly, in *Vicissitudes Abroad*, Adelaide accepts a job as a governess to financially provide for herself and Henrietta. Rather than characterizing women as dependents, Bennett composes three mature and dynamic women who embrace employment and financial independence. *Anna*, *The Beggar Girl*, and *Vicissitudes Abroad* are mirrored by Bennett's own life in relation to her financial independence from Pye through authorship.

The Beggar Girl and Her Benefactors features a main character who pursues a career in order to financially provide for herself. After going through boarding school as a student Rosa proceeds to obtain a teaching job. While a student, Rosa, "with the best of dispositions, quick perception, retentive memory, strong judgment, and docile genius, could not fail of being an object of general esteem and admiration" (224-25; vol. 1). Therefore, with her great success at the school as a student, it is no wonder that Rosa thinks of herself as a capable teacher. When the school suddenly has a job opening, the superintendent,

had lately been inquiring for another lady to add to the number of her teachers, and only waited till one should offer, worthy to rank with the amiable women already in her employ. Rosa knew herself competent to the situation, and offered to fill it-not in the language of solicitation, of distress, nor humiliation, but with a frank and just confidence that the arrangement would be mutually beneficial (246; vol. 1).

Not only does Rosa take on a career as a teacher for the benefits of financial independence and freedom, but she also gains a sense of self-worth. Rosa is aware of her strengths and is fully confident in her abilities. Teaching not only supplies Rosa with funds in order to sustain her lifestyle, but also provides her with confidence.

Anna, like Rosa, also seeks employment in order to end her dependence on the uncharitable Dalton family. She goes to the Desmoulins' household in search of a job, who hire her on the spot and send her home with a waistcoat to embroider as her first task. When she receives her first assignment,

A second hand frame was immediately purchased, and the work began with such eagerness, she would hardly spare any time for eating and rest... No princess could be happier than Anna Mansel while so laudably employed. The waistcoat was soon finished and carried home (112; vol. 2).

When the Desmoulins see the finished coat, they are greatly impressed. The Desmoulins were both good judges of their business, and the particular neatness and beauty of her work changed the harsh, unwomanly features of the mistress into a placid smile. [Anna] was liberally paid, and given fresh employ of a superior sort, with promise of constant work. Her heart bounded with joy (113; vol. 2).

Like Rosa in *The Beggar Girl and Her Benefactors*, Anna appears to have found a sense of self-worth by attaining a job and supporting herself financially.

Adelaide, in *Vicissitudes Abroad; or the Ghost of My Father*, seeks employment as a governess for Mrs. Monkwel's children in order to financially provide for herself and her mother, Henrietta. Upon meeting the girl, Mrs. Monkwel "did all like the musical talents of the new governess" (177; vol. 5). When speaking of Adelaide's new job, Henrietta realizes, "it was

an act of necessity, not choice, from which her little treasure could not relieve us, that forced a very short separation (85; vol. 5). While Henrietta is disappointed that Adelaide is leaving, Henrietta understands that Adelaide is seeking employment in order to gain financial stability and provide for them both.

Like many of her heroines, Bennett also worked hard to achieve and retain financial stability. A usual career for women in her time would have been to find work as a governess, but Bennett reached financial stability in a very unique way, while still functioning within the domestic setting. By writing novels, she functioned within the private sphere and wrote about her experiences in the public setting. Like her heroines, Bennett was able to support herself in a career in which she prospered. Before finding a career she was reliant on men to provide financial support, but Bennett's "Writing provided a route to autonomy and the control of one's income" (Eger). Her craft allowed her to transform into a self-supporting woman and provide for her two illegitimate children.

Law

Battles with the law and unfair treatment within the justice system are popular topics within Bennett's novels. Many of the main characters in *Ellen, Countess of Castle Howel* participate in a hunt for missing funds to pay off debts. In *The Beggar Girl and Her Benefactors* Rosa worries that her benefactor died and left her without any protection. And, in both *De Valcourt* and *Juvenile Indiscretions*, the main protagonists are thrown in jail multiple times when in metropolitan cities.

In *Ellen; Countess of Castle Howel*, there is a legal scavenger hunt in progress, in which the characters are looking for a missing pocket book. The pocket book contains money "for the express purpose of paying debts, still owing" (149; vol. 2). In the midst of the search for the pocket book, Lord Castle Howel dies in a riding accident, leaving his family in immense debt. Upon first hearing the news, Ellen, "could form no conception how Lord Castle Howel, who, if ever there lived a just man was surely one, could have run in debt" (10; vol. 4). Because of these debts, "little did the fond mother foresee, that she whose heart had never known guile, in the smallest instance, would be accused of fraud; or that the innocent child on whom his noble father doated, would be cheated of his birth-right" (12-13; vol. 4). Ellen realizes she will be accused of fraud and her child will lose all rights to his title. Also, because Lord Castle Howel never paid the mortgage on the estate, the Meredith family is being evicted; "the family are all turned out of Code Gwyn, Mr. Meredith cannot afford to pay a curate, and there is no room for the Countess" (107-08; vol. 4). The end of the novel, however, brings an end to the financial mystery. The pocket book is discovered and Ellen and her son get their part of the fortune.

The heavy emphasis on law, especially in *Ellen; Countess of Castle Howel*, aligns perfectly with the events of Bennett's life. As she wrote the novel, Bennett was in the midst of a

legal battle over the lease of the Edinburgh Theatre, where her daughter was a famous actress. In the summer of 1792, Harriet Pye Esten won the lease of the Edinburgh theatre. After she won the lease Harriet left the management responsibilities to her mother, while Harriet played her third season at the theatre in Covent Garden (Highfill). However, on July 20, 1793 Harriet Esten gave up the lease to the Edinburgh theatre to Stephen Kemble (Highfill). This trade soon resulted in a legal battle when Harriet tried to get the theatre back. Finally, later in 1793, Harriet signed “Harriet Pye Esten” into the legal papers for the management of the theatre. This pairs nicely with the publication date for *Ellen, Countess of Castle Howel*, which was published in 1794 and most likely written during the height of the legal battle over the theatre.

Ellen relates closely to Bennett’s life, yet other novels such as *De Valcourt* and *Juvenile Indiscretions* are also heavily influenced by law. In *De Valcourt*, her main protagonist is stripped of all his property due to his incessant gambling. He then gets involved in a pistol dual and is arrested. De Valcourt states, “I was now conveyed to prison, and left to darkness and despair... I seemed borne down with the weight of my own guilt. My life, if prolonged, would now be a series of wretchedness” (125; vol. 1). Once the other man involved in the pistol dual recovers, De Valcourt is let out. Unfortunately for De Valcourt, he is soon arrested in Paris and returned to prison on account of his debts.

Multiple arrests also appear in *Juvenile Indiscretions*. A charitable woman gives the poor Henry some money and instructs him to go stay with her friend. However, on Henry’s way to the given address the unscrupulous Mr. Ralph picks him up and brings him to court because he saw Henry with the purse of gold coins. In court, when the men see Henry they remark, “is that he, hay? he looks like a, what I call a thorough-bred thief” (61; vol. 1). When Henry is questioned

about the assumed stolen gold, he responds saying that he hasn't stolen the money. In order to incarcerate Henry, the judge asks Mr. Ralph,

To be sure, to be sure, you, Mr. Ralph, you saw this radical steal this purse? [Mr. Ralph responds] No, your worship, I don't zay that; I zeed the lad in the ruad, and he axed to ride, whereof he tould me as he'd no money, and zo I fyed I'd ax he for nuone, and zo ater that I lugged out that vine silken purse. [And the judge responds] Well, well, well, same thing, same thing; so you had a suspicion he stole the purse (65; vol. 1).

In this court scene, Henry's unfair trial is enhanced by assumptions based on his appearance and Mr. Ralph's somewhat idiotic speech. Dellmore is then thrown in prison on pure speculation. While in prison Henry reflects that he "knew no crime he had been guilty of, except poverty" (72; vol. 1).

Throughout her life Bennett had her own turbulent relationship with the law, especially when dealing with the exchange of the lease of the Edinburgh theatre. However, Bennett also used the law to her advantage. After having two children with Pye, Bennett found a letter from him addressed to another mistress. After leaving his house with her two illegitimate children, Bennett threatened to blackmail Pye if he did not promise to provide for herself and her two children. This blackmail consisted of revealing his personal opinions about a famous trial. As a naval officer, "during the American Revolution, Pye had reluctantly presided over one of the most famous trials of the day, the court martial of Admiral Augustus Keppel. [Pye] evidently expressed his personal opinions on the case to [Bennett], who later threatened to use them against him" (Taylor). In this case, Pye served as a dishonorable judge, which Bennett uses in her portrayal of the judge in *Juvenile Indiscretions*. In this way, Bennett uses the law to her advantage and threatens her husband with exposure of his opinions on the famous trial.

The use of law in her novels was incredibly disagreeable in the 18th century. In a critique of Charlotte Smith's, *The Young Philosopher*, the reviewer states, "The best of our female novelists interferes not with church nor state. There are no politics in *Evelina* or *Cecilia*" (Runge 294). In this critique the reviewer shows that Burney did not discuss politics or law in her texts, therefore every other female should not include these social concerns within their work. Though the discussion of topics on law and politics was not deemed appropriate in female novels, Bennett brings in these themes anyway. Similar to her life, Bennett understood and dealt with the law, which she used as inspiration for her novels.

Negative Portrayals of Men

Bennett's novels illustrate the dichotomy of moral versus immoral characters, especially in familial settings. She adopts a pessimistic tone with men in general, but especially when presenting husband and father figures. In *Anna; Or Memoirs of Welch Heiress* and *Ellen; Countess of Castle Howel* Bennett illustrates men who spread rumors about women for revenge. Also, in *Ellen; Countess of Castle Howel*, she shows how men "help" women to make them indebted to men. For greed, in *Anna; Memoirs of a Welch Heiress*, *Juvenile Indiscretions*, and *Vicissitudes Abroad; or the Ghost of My Father* Bennett showcases greedy and avaricious men. Not only does she use greed as a negative trait for men, but Bennett also characterizes many male characters as unfaithful and domineering. In *Juvenile Indiscretions*, Bennett represents fathers who are cruel to their families and unfaithful in marriage. In *Agnes DeCourci: A Domestic Tale*, *De Valcourt*, and *Vicissitudes Abroad; Or the Ghost of My Father*, Bennett juxtaposes unfaithful men with dynamic mothers who purposefully distance themselves and their children from their deceitful husbands. By using inspiration from her life experiences with Pye, Bennett writes herself and Pye into *Anna*, *Juvenile Indiscretions*, *Agnes DeCourci*, *Ellen*, *De Valcourt*, and *Vicissitudes Abroad*. Many of these texts all involve unfaithful, deceptive, and cruel fathers and husbands.

I. Rumors and Enforced Dependence

Men in Bennett's texts spread rumors and gossip in order to undermine women and make them financially dependent on men. In Bennett's first text, *Anna; Or Memoirs of a Welch Heiress* the young Colonel Gorget is one of several men who plague Anna with their unwanted attention. After first seeing her, "[Gorget] retired early under pretense of fatigue, but in reality to ruminate on the means most likely to put him in possession of the charming Anna" (60; vol. 1).

Upon seeing Anna, Gorget makes the decision to advance towards her with the goal of marriage. Despite the fact that Anna is fourteen and the Colonel is fifty, he delights in the fact that Anna “was nobody, she was destitute of natural friends; no resentful father, no avenging brother, no injured husband, had he now to fear” (61; vol. 1). The Colonel observes that Anna has no male protectors, and believes this will make his marital pursuit easier. At his first attempt to spend time with Anna, the Colonel is interrupted by the servant, Mrs. Barlow, who quickly whisks Anna away. While waiting for his opportunity the Colonel “felt his desires increase every moment for the innocent victim he had marked for his own” (74; vol. 1). Colonel Gorget finally gets an opportunity alone with Anna to make his feelings known;

He could no longer, no longer restrain the transports of a passion he secretly vowed no power should prevent him from gratifying; - catching [Anna] in his arms, he swore she was more than a mortal - she was divine - and ravishing from her hitherto - unpolluted lips kisses, not less disgusting from his figure that frightful from his vehemence, for a moment deprived her of all power of resistance, soon, however, thoroughly terrified at his indecent violence, her screams rent the grove; but lost now to every idea except that of gratifying his hideous passion, he recollected not how far he was removed from that country where rape and murders are tolerated acts; deaf to her cries, unmoved by her youth and terror (84-85; vol. 1).

Anna’s screams are overheard and she is able to escape the Colonel’s grasp. However, by running away, Anna is not nearly free of Gorget. Because of Anna’s rejection, the Colonel seeks revenge by spreading wicked rumors about her. When Gorget’s attempted rape of Anna fails, he convinces Anna’s caretaker, Mrs. Melmont, that Anna is fundamentally immoral and that her unprincipled influence on the household demands her banishment. The Colonel tells Mrs.

Melmont that because of her immoral character, “that the girl was wholly unworthy the kindness shown her” (96-97; vol. 1). He then seals his argument with a one hundred-pound bribe to Mrs. Melmont who orders that the orphan be sent away to London. By ensuring Anna’s removal from Melmont’s care, Colonel Gorget takes revenge for Anna’s rejection.

Not only do these men spread rumors about women, but in *Ellen; Countess of Castle Howel*, after Ellen gambles away much of her husband’s fortune in London, Lord Claverton takes advantage of the situation. Knowing Ellen is in a dangerous state, and cannot win the money back, he extends a proposition to her. Lord Claverton

well knew Lord Castle Howel’s fortune would not support his wife’s extravagance; he saw with pleasure she was sinking deeper and deeper into the vortex of dissipation... he wished to see her embarrassed, and in debt, but not to Lord Charles Dash... he could not bear any other man should take a liberty he *dared* not to think of” (89; vol. 2).

Lord Claverton derives immense pleasure from the fact that Ellen is in financial trouble and needs his assistance. However, he is not willing to simply help Ellen out of debt, but rather he wants Ellen to be indebted to him. Lord Claverton uses his finances in order to make Ellen dependent on him. When Lord Claverton offers Ellen his pocketbook, “Ellen met his eyes, they were so hateful, and his touch (for he had again taken her hand) so petrifying, that she received the book and took notes out to the amount of his debt, and turned from him without speaking” (90; vol. 2). Ellen is finally aware that by taking the money she is indebted to him, but she has no choice other than to accept his “help.”

II. Greed

Bennett’s first novel, *Anna; or Memoirs of a Welch Heiress* displays a greedy cleric. When the Reverend Dalton finds the orphaned Anna and searches through her trunk, he notes, “[the

trunk] contained no sort of information of that kind, or indeed any other but what he fully resolved to conceal with the most guarded secrecy, and that was, the exact sum of fourteen hundred guineas” (6; vol. 1). Rather than finding personal identification for the girl, Dalton was faced with an incredible sum of money. At the sight of this temptation, the narrator shows,

the temptation was strong, the tempted weak; avarice is a dangerous, it is an encroaching vice: Dalton had not any immediate intention of converting to his own use the money: but when once the glittering bait was secure in his possession, no witness or person to demand it but an innocent child, who could not now possibly want it, how difficult for a greedy heart, such as that of Dalton, to be just, when justice would have deprived him of fourteen hundred guineas (7; vol. 1).

Bennett makes it very clear that Dalton does not intend to return or use the money for Anna’s upbringing. Rather, he views the money as his monetary reward for taking care of the orphan. Dalton is described as having one main concern in his life, money (11; vol. 1). However, Dalton does not construct his grand plan without devising a cover story. He thinks, “should the child be owned and the money claimed: - well, if that happened, how could it be proved he had it?” (12; vol. 1). In the presence of money Reverend Dalton is revealed to be a greedy man rather than an upstanding part of his community, as one would expect with his title. Reverend Dalton not only steals from Anna when she is young, but also refuses to take care of her when she is older. In her travels away from the Daltons, Anna stays with another family who provides for her until they run into significant financial trouble. After Anna leaves the charitable family, she contacts the Daltons. When asked to stay with the Daltons the greedy reverend is “rejoiced to her [Anna’s finances] in no need of his assistance” (116; vol. 1). After leaving the Dalton’s yet again, Anna stays with Mrs. Mansel. After Mrs. Mansel passes away, Anna, yet again, ends up at the Dalton

household. Reverend Dalton's first reaction upon seeing Anna is, "What, the bad money returned?" (155; vol. 1). In order to keep Reverend Dalton at bay, Anna agrees that she will pay for her own board while she stays with them. Rather than being the ideal image of piety, the reverend is consumed by avarice.

In her work, *Romantic Wales*, Jane Aaron notes the hypocrisy of the Methodist preachers as a common trope in Bennett's novels. Aaron argues that "Methodists are similarly derided for mouthing meaningless hypocrisies, and for their hypocrisy when it comes to money matters in Anna Maria Bennett's Welsh novels" (28). Aaron examines Bennett's *Anna; or Memoirs of a Welch Heiress* and shows that Reverend Dalton is "one of the book's worst villains, [who] exploits the orphan Anna in a manner which later which the text represents as characteristic of Methodist preachers" (28).

Bennett's second novel, *Juvenile Indiscretions*, openly characterizes the cleric, Dr. Orthodox, as being overcome by avarice. Bennett states,

Dr. Orthodox loved money; he was covetous on the extreme... The truth is, however high in his estimation was the value of riches, however desirable every thing that tended to the obtaining them, there was something more desirable than wealth, more valuable than power, and that was his own dear self... he grudged no money, no expenses, to procure the most costly delicacies for his own table, which he would devour with such voracious greediness (91; vol. 1).

Not only does Bennett highlight the cleric's overall bad characteristics of jealousy and gluttony, but she touches on these facets of his personality as a result of his greediness. Similar to Reverend Dalton in *Anna; Memoirs of a Welch Heiress*, Dr. Orthodox works with the parish and

the reader would expect him to be honest and moral. However, both Reverend Dalton and Dr. Orthodox are highlighted as moral failures.

The untrustworthy St. Herman in *Vicissitudes Abroad; or the Ghost of My Father* is also overcome with avarice. After he lies to his mistress, Henrietta, about his name and lineage, she escapes to the country. However, Henrietta becomes aware that,

St. Herman had been at our lodging late the night before. He had brought a man and woman and two coaches with him. His companions waited in the hall. He did not enquire for me, but his object was the Paris trunks; and he raved, the cook said, like a madman when he did not see them in the usual place. After opening all the drawers, and taking several things out, he went away (75; vol. 1).

Like Reverend Dalton, who stole money from Anna's trunk, St. Herman goes to his wife's lodging with the sole purpose of stealing her money and jewels.

III. Unfaithful and Domineering Fathers and Husbands

In *Juvenile Indiscretions*, Dr. Orthodox is described as a man of the parish who treats his wife and daughters with little respect; “[Dr. Orthodox] ruled with a rod of iron, and his wife and daughters were inured to compliment his dictates with a blind, though affected obedience” (93; vol. 1). Along with ruling over his daughters, Dr. Orthodox also overrules his wife, who is “frightened out of her wits, at having once in her life ventured to give *her* opinion before she had consulted her husband, instantly set about retracting and gently drawing on his slippers” (112; vol. 1). The first time Mrs. Orthodox gives her own opinion, rather than consulting her husband and mirroring his opinion, she immediately withdraws. Mrs. Orthodox is shown as even more submissive throughout the text as she is often referred to as an “echo” to Dr. Orthodox (113; vol.

1). Because of her husband's power in the household, Mrs. Orthodox has been forced into submission, thus losing her own voice.

Mr. Gab is another example of a bad husband whose unfaithfulness costs his wife her peace of mind. When staying with the Gabs, Henry Dellmore notices that

[Mr. Gab] seldom passed his evenings at home; it was not indeed within the last two months by any means certain *where* he did pass them, which circumstance considered, it is no wonder the sweetness of Mrs. Gab's temper should be disturbed, particularly when it is known that he actually had been found out, once or twice, in preferring [*sic*] the society of a light-hearted female to the croud which on his lady's night filled his house... Mrs. Gab was too certain of this (84; vol. 3).

Mrs. Gab has no doubts that her husband is unfaithful and that he prefers a young and lively woman rather than her own company.

Agnes DeCourci develops Bennett's theme of bad husbands even further. This text illustrates a wife leaving her assumed unfaithful husband, rather than acting as the patient Griselda figure. *Agnes DeCourci* is written in an epistolary format and the first letter is from General Moncrass to Major Melrose. Moncrass writes,

Lady Mary actually has, (or which is in effect exactly the same thing, thinks she has) cause for her jealousy. Her passions are strong, her attachments, as has been proved, are founded on principle: Every sentiment of her soul is sanctioned by the strictest honor... she charges me with *cruelty-cruelty* to her, to my wife the first *love* of my youth...

Honor! cried she, what is the honor that obliges General Moncrass to destroy the peace of his wife (3; vol. 1).

Lady Mary Moncrass is reacting to the fact that she thinks her husband has taken a mistress named Agnes Courci. The General writes that “Lady Mary had ordered the travelling coach, and left the house soon after I retired to my library” (4; vol. 1). In response to his assumed infidelity, Lady Mary takes their child and leaves her husband. The general writes multiple letters to his wife, but “[his] letters were returned unopened” (4; vol. 1). With these letters, the General tries tirelessly to explain himself to his wife, but with no success.

De Valcourt also employs the theme of unfaithful husbands. The young Matilda grows up educated by her aunt, where her “early days had passed in retirement; the little society she had mixed with was such as to rouse the latent sparks of genius, and call forth intellectual exertions, while it fostered romantic feelings, which a more general knowledge of the world might have suppressed” (3; vol. 1). Matilda’s aunt stands in sharp contrast to her father, who is described as “gloomy and severe, checked all her lively follies, and damped that innocent cheerfulness and sportive gaiety with which she had been wont to charm: She felt the change; her spirits sank and the paternal roof seemed the tomb of all her hopes” (3-4; vol. 1). For Matilda, her aunt represents imagination and acquisition of new knowledge, while her father deprives her of all her lively joys.

Unfortunately for Matilda, her time spent with ill-mannered males does not end once she becomes of marriageable age. After marrying Lord Mountshannon, she states that, in her husband she could find

no associate; it would not assimilate with hers; he could listen to the emanations of genius unmoved; nor had the tender caresses of affection power to soften his heart... she

sighed with regret at the painful disappointment; and her soul sickened at the recollection, that only death could break the fetters voluntarily put on, or dissolve the mental slavery in which she was bound (5; vol. 1).

Matilda feels like a slave to her husband, and regretfully notes that her binding contract to him can only be broken in death. Once she learns that she is pregnant, she “exert[s] all her powers to awaken affection in his heart, but in vain” (6; vol. 1).

Bennett’s final novel, *Vicissitudes Abroad*, focuses on her protagonist, Henrietta, who is corrupted by the scoundrel St. Herman. After marrying him, “Not a moment was left for reflection. The man’s rapturous gratitude was almost frenzy: he lifted me into a travelling chaise... nor till we had passed the barrier, had I breath to ask where we were going, nor words to express my consternation when he replied ‘to England’” (41; vol. 1). Henrietta is torn away from Paris without a word and taken to England by force with no idea of how long she would be gone. While in England Henrietta gives birth to a son, but one day in an angry frenzy, St. Herman, “swore to leave me and my brat to starve” (58; vol. 1). St. Herman leaves his wife and child for several days, but when he finally returns, he drinks “more wine than he was in the habit of drinking at home” and he reveals to Henrietta that St. Herman is not his real name and he is actually an Irish man who has been disinherited from his family’s fortune (60-61; vol. 1). Upon receiving this new information, Henrietta comes to the realization, “then I am not a wife, and my child is -” (61; vol. 1). Henrietta realizes that she is now a mother to an illegitimate child. After her husband’s falsities are revealed, Henrietta takes her son and escapes to the country.

Anna; Or Memoirs of a Welch Heiress, Juvenile Indiscretions, Agnes DeCourci: A Domestic tale, De Valcourt, and Vicissitudes Abroad; Or the Ghost of My Father all showcase husbands and fathers as immoral and rough. Specifically, in *Juvenile Indiscretions, Agnes*

DeCourci, *De Valcourt*, and *Vicissitudes Abroad* Bennett illustrates unfaithful men. In response to these men, Bennett offers two examples of how wives react to their deceitful husbands. In *Juvenile Indiscretions*, Bennett characterizes Mrs. Orthodox and Mrs. Gab as women who passively accept the disloyalty and remain in the marriage. However, in *Agnes DeCourci*, *De Valcourt*, and *Vicissitudes Abroad* Bennett uses her experiences with Pye to shape her construction of the dynamic mother figures who take their children and abandon their husbands. Like the mothers who recognize their husband's unfaithfulness, upon realizing Pye's affair, Bennett took her two children and fled.

In her article, "Reading the Marriage Plot" Mary-Catherine Harrison discusses that the marriage plots in the novels of Burney, Austen, and Richardson showcase ideal marriages. Harrison notes, "It is in part because of these novels that we think of marriage the way that we do; in many cases they provide models for the marriages we still desire." These ideal marriages are another common trope of the 18th century novel that Bennett changes. Rather than offering an ideal form of marriage, Bennett showcases imperfect relationships, like what she experienced with Pye. By using her life events as inspiration for the men in her novels, Bennett disrupts the common trope of idealized marriages in 18th century novels.

Feminine Vulnerability

The theme of female vulnerability is also a common trope in Bennett's novels, most likely connected to her own experience. Because of her role as a single mother to illegitimate children and her lack of male protectors, Bennett's place in society was precarious. This insecure position is displayed throughout Bennett's work in the forms of physical illness, May-December marriages, and kidnapping. In *Juvenile Indiscretions* and *Vicissitudes Abroad; Or the Ghost of My Father* female illness is used both to highlight women's emotions after being rejected and to illustrate lower class powerlessness. In *Ellen; Countess of Castle Howel*, Bennett illustrates a May-December marriage. In *Vicissitudes Abroad*, Bennett showcases both female illness and kidnapping. Though Bennett herself did not experience kidnapping or serious illnesses that we know of, it is presumed that she was still aware of the place of women and their vulnerable position in society. Through a close reading of *Juvenile Indiscretions*, *Ellen*, and *Vicissitudes Abroad* one can identify the specific instances Bennett uses to examine women's vulnerable position in society.

I. Illness

Bennett portrays female vulnerability through physical illness, which conveys the image of frailty and fragility for Bennett's female characters. Bennett uses illness in *Juvenile Indiscretions* to portray physical manifestations of rejection. Within the first volume Henry Dellmore attracts the attentions of Lavina Orthodox. However, Henry makes it clear that he has no intention of marrying her (166; vol. 1). Lavina's inner turmoil is manifested in her physical health, when the next day Dr. Orthodox tells Henry "[The Orthodox family] were all very well... all but Lavy, who, her mother feared, would go into a decline; she had quite lost her appetite and had a sick stomach" (169; vol. 1). Bennett addresses the rejection Lavina received from Henry as

affecting her physical state. Her physical manifestations echo her inner feelings of rejection. Lavina is not the only woman in *Juvenile Indiscretions* to exhibit physical effects after being rejected. Once Henry does yield and proposes to Lavina, the distressed Clara Elton goes through similar physical symptoms. After being notified of the engagement, Clara is diagnosed with “a fever... [which] overwhelmed Miss Elton with grief” (119; vol. 2).

Vicissitudes Abroad; Or the Ghost of My Father also examines female illness, but not as a physical manifestation of emotions. Within this novel, Bennett uses physical illnesses to emphasize fragility and vulnerability for lower-class women. In *Vicissitudes Abroad*, Adelaide falls ill with a fever that Henrietta, states “had so considerably increased, that I could not think of moving, much less of leaving her” (125; vol. 4). Adelaide’s health continues to spiral and Madame Chevereux comments, “this poor child gets no strength, no colour, no breath, no appetite; she looks like a ghost, and, more than that, will very soon be one if you do not take care” (135; vol. 4). Adelaide is incredibly ill, which makes her appear fragile and weak. Throughout the text, Henrietta then falls ill with a “raging fever” and “small-pox, of the most indolent and virulent sort... it had lain in my blood till the whole system was infected” (202; vol. 5). Henrietta’s illness exaggerates her vulnerability as a lower class woman, because when a doctor examines her, “‘This lady is very bad,’ said he; ‘I can do very little more for her - she ought to have a physician. But, Mrs. Fanner, who is to pay?’” (209; vol. 5). The situation of payment makes Henrietta considerably more vulnerable because she and Adelaide cannot afford proper healthcare.

II. May-December Marriage

Illness was not the only way Bennett showcased feminine powerlessness at the hands of their male counterparts. Another way she showcased vulnerability was through May-December

marriages for financial reasons, which were common in the time of her writing. In *Ellen; Countess of Castle Howel*, Lord Castle Howel's looming marriage proposal displeases Ellen greatly, but Lord Howel has agreed to pay off the Meredith's debts in return for Ellen's hand in marriage. The age gap is made clear within the texts when the narrator refers to Lord Howel as "so old and respectable" in comparison to Ellen, his "young bride" (187; vol. 1). The narrator states, if "[Ellen] acceded to the Earl's proposal she would add to the wretched list of young females, who, with the best of disposition, bound to men for whom they have no predilection" (187; vol. 1). Ellen is forced to marry the Earl for money and to solidify the Earl's relationship with her family. In these marriages, men hold the position of power through their seniority; therefore, the women are at the mercy of their older husbands. In this marriage Ellen is a powerless pawn who must submit to the wishes of men around her.

Ellen's marriage reflects Bennett's own relationship with her lover/employer, Sir Thomas Pye. He was born around 1708 and Bennett was not born until 1750. Pye also had a wife before his affair with Bennett, but after his wife's death, Pye and Bennett began their short-lived and turbulent affair. Though they never married, Bennett's relationship with him is reminiscent of Ellen's marriage to Lord Howel. Like Ellen's impending marriage to Lord Howel, Bennett gained short-lived financial stability through her relationship with Pye. Therefore, Ellen and possibly Bennett were seduced by financial stability rather than the prospect of a relationship based on mutual love and respect.

III. Kidnapping

Kidnapping shows women at their most vulnerable. Associations with kidnapping include loss of chastity, wealth, and status. In *Vicissitudes Abroad; Or the Ghost of my Father*, the evil Abbe Roquelar kidnaps Adelaide and will not return her until her mother agrees to marry him.

After Henrietta's daughter is kidnapped by the Abbe, she pleads with him, "after our interview yesterday, I should send for you; but you see me humbled to the dust: every offence you have taken is avenged. Have pity on me - I implore your compassion - release my child" (76; vol. 3). In this situation, the Abbe has kidnapped Henrietta's daughter and will not release her until Henrietta agrees to marry him. The Abbe tells her, "Be mine at once, unequivocally mine, and your daughter shall be restored to you in safety" (77; vol. 3). In this way, the Abbe is using Henrietta's daughter as a bargaining chip in order to attain her hand in marriage, which fails.

Presumably, Bennett felt extremely vulnerable when she moved away from Pye with her two illegitimate children. By displaying physical illness, mismatched marriages, and kidnapping Bennett illustrates the vulnerability she felt once she occupied the role of a single mother in her society. However, she did attempt to gain control over Pye by blackmailing him into help her financially support her children. She uses her final novel to champion the strength of women by showing a mother who overcomes her own vulnerability. Just as she blackmailed Pye and Henrietta denied a marriage between her and the Abbe, Bennett showcases the strength of mothers. Bennett, like Henrietta, was willing to fight for her children's well-being. With Henrietta in *Vicissitudes Abroad*, Bennett diverts from the passive patient Griselda figure in favor of a dynamic mother who is strong enough to overcome her vulnerability. Rather than using Henrietta as a character to showcase the patient Griselda figure, Bennett makes a point of using the strong mother figure to combat female powerlessness.

Conclusion

Though Bennett received criticism at the time of her publications for rebelling against the accepted standard, she remained popular among readers both during and after her lifetime. Even more interesting is the lack of scholarship on Bennett's life and novels. She is very rarely studied in texts covering 18th century authors, despite the fact that she was widely read during her time. Therefore, this research will add to the already vibrant scholarship on 18th century authors and bring a virtually unknown female author into the spotlight.

Bennett did not lose motivation or inspiration once her writing career began. Much of the inspiration for her characters and plots were sourced directly from her life as a single mother and her precarious position in society. 18th century historians now regard Bennett as "The leading fiction publisher of the decade, she became a phenomenally best-selling author" (Franklin). However, Bennett's success was not immediate as she received criticism at the time of publication for deviating from the accepted standards for novels at the time. By discussing law, female financial independence, imperfect marriages, and active females Bennett openly disregarded the accepted novel guidelines.

Bennett can be held in sharp contrast to Hannah More and Frances Burney who both wrote educational and moral texts. Though Bennett possibly hopes to educate her readers with her novels, she does not teach them the "proper" lessons. In her article, "Avoiding the Perils of the Muse: Hannah More, Didactic Literature, and Eighteenth-Century Criticism" Jane Nardin notes, "Since their young and often uneducated readers identify with fictional heroes and rely on novels of common life to regulate their own practices, it follows that the best examples only should be exhibited (314). Rather than offering readers ideal marriages and passive wives, Bennett shows readers portraits of her own experiences as part of the middle class. Through her

novels, she presented readers with strong women who could provide for themselves after their marriages failed. After Bennett's death in 1808, many notable authors continued reading her works, including S.T. Coleridge, who described *The Beggar Girl and her Benefactors* as "her most interesting work." Further, Coleridge contends that *The Beggar Girl and Her Benefactors* is "the best novel since Fielding." (*The Bloomsbury Dictionary*).

An in-depth analysis of Bennett's novels and life experiences reveal her deviations from the conventional tropes of the 18th century novel and why she took such liberties. I hope that this research will bring Bennett into the company of other respected 18th century novelists.

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