

# Communicating the Lessons of Chastity: *The Lady's Magazine* August 1770 – July 1771

by Ronald Frankland

*The Lady's Magazine: or Entertaining Companion for the Fair Sex, Appropriated Solely to Their Use and Amusement*, began in August 1770.<sup>1</sup> The magazine included many poems, prose works, and epistolary exchanges that had a common discourse of feminine modesty. This was a consistent message throughout the periodical that communicated the importance of female chastity and its connection to social disgrace if a woman lost her virtue. In the seminal work by Robert D. Mayo, *The English Novel in the Magazine, 1740-1815*, he asserted that magazines shifted from paying professional contributors to accepting works from readers, which is exemplified in the serial "A Sentimental Journey" in *The Lady's Magazine*. Mayo provides extensive research in which he evaluated the readers' moral, religious, social, and literary attitudes, which were displayed in the essays throughout the magazine. In 1970, Cynthia White provided a general analysis of eighteenth-century women's periodicals in her book *Women's Magazines 1693-1968*. White analyzed how social, economic, and political changes impacted the periodical industry. Her work helped contextualize *The Lady's Magazine* and the time period of these publications. White claimed that women had more access to education and began to read more which contributed to the publication of the magazine. Likewise, in 1971 John Miller published his article "Eighteenth-Century Periodicals for Women," in which he analyzed the influence women had on periodicals in the eighteenth century after literacy among middle-class women increased. The middle class provided their daughters with a limited formal education focused on dancing, music, and needlework. Miller explains that this new market of literate women became a significant part of the reading public. This led to *The Lady's Magazine* which mirrored the *Gentlemen's Magazine* in content until the 1770s.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Alison Adburgham in her book *Women in Print*, examined the role women writers had as early contributors to men's magazines such as the *Gentlemen's Magazine* and how the success of their writing led to the formation of *The Lady's Magazine*. By the early nineteenth century, *The Lady's Magazine* focused solely on fashion and domesticity and left out content that was political, informative, or educational. Kathryn Shevelow also

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<sup>1</sup> John Coote. and John Wheble. *The Lady's Magazine: Or Entertaining Companion for the Fair Sex, Appropriated solely to their Use and Amusement*. London: Printed for Robinson and Roberts, 1770-1771. August 1770.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

contributed to the analysis of eighteenth-century periodicals in her 1989 work *Women and Print Culture*. Shevelow argued that the creation of the “domestic woman” began in the 1690s and continued in periodicals to the present day. Publications typically portrayed women in three life stages: virgin, wife, and widow, with wife as the most desirable. Rosalind Ballaster in *Women’s Worlds* explored women’s contributions to magazines from the late seventeenth century to the twentieth century, and how they influenced readers. Ballaster focuses on the perceptions of social relations and gender roles.

The study of women’s periodicals is crucial to understanding the lives of women, the role of women in society, and the role periodicals had in influencing women’s lives. According to White, *The Lady’s Magazine* “became a firmly entrenched favorite with women of the leisured classes.”<sup>3</sup> The editor of the magazine “expressed surprise that, although reading had become more popular with women than in former times, no periodical existed expressly designed for their amusement and improvement.”<sup>4</sup> The majority of the magazine consisted of fictional prose and moral essays. It also included needlework patterns, recipes, poems, music, and a small section of domestic and foreign news.<sup>5</sup> The magazine was unique because the prose, essays, and poems were not exclusively from professional writers; the editors also included submissions from the women readers that sent in amateur material for publication. Much of the material focused on eighteenth-century societal norms and morals, specifically focusing on women in “interesting stories, novels, tales, romances, intended to confirm chastity and recommend virtue.”<sup>6</sup> This paper focuses on how *The Lady’s Magazine* communicated chastity to its readers and will examine the cultural fear of women losing their virginity, the fear of seduction, and how chaste and unchaste women were described in prose and poems.

In the eighteenth century, the English upper and middle classes, argued that women’s honor and social status were dependent on their chastity. In order for a woman to maintain her honor she must refrain from all temptations that might lead to losing her virginity. Many of the writings also focused on the threat of seduction and the importance of resisting temptation in order to remain virtuous and maintain a high moral reputation. Eighteenth-century professional and amateur writers perpetuated the narratives of chaste and unchaste women, which always showed the chaste woman

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<sup>3</sup> Cynthia White. *Women’s Magazines 1693-1968*. London: Michael Joseph Books on Live Issues, 1970. 31.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Kathryn Shevelow. *Women and Print Culture: The Construction of Femininity in the Early Periodical*. London and New York: Routledge, 1989. 189.

<sup>6</sup> John Coote and John Wheble. *The Lady’s Magazine*, London: Printed for Robinson and Roberts, 1770-1771. August 1770 issue. A3.

living a wonderful life, while the unchaste lived a life of hardship and struggle. Virtue and chastity were used synonymously when describing a woman's virginity.

During this time, the cultural fear was that young adults were losing their virginity before marriage, which ruined the reputations of the women involved in the encounters. The writers in *The Lady's Magazine* reasserted this idea by focusing on the "glory days" and promoting a return to the "virtuous past," which was a mythical time when women remained "pure virgins" and were not corrupted by male seduction.<sup>7</sup> In an essay *On the State of Matrimony*, the writer highlighted the desire to return to a society that values chastity as much as the ancient Germanic peoples. Germanic women were "noted for fidelity to their marriage bed; and indeed, chastity seems to have been the general character of this nation." The writer claimed that there were "very few adulterers in the populous nation; where the power of instantly inflicting punishment was granted to the injured husband." The punishments described were typically harsh and often public; some husbands would cut off their wives' hair and whip them throughout the village while they were naked. Women who committed adultery were also subject to the Church's condemnation and the belief that they would meet their "severest torments of the next world." The writer also listed the laws of chastity in Denmark, Iceland, and Sweden, all of which were similar to the Germans. In Denmark, adulterous acts were viewed harshly by the community with strict punishments that allowed for the "woman who was detected in it [to be] sold on the spot."

Likewise, in Iceland, they did "not only denounce very severe punishments against rapes and adulteries, but provided farther; expressly prohibiting even kissing or secret embraces."<sup>8</sup> Similarly, "among the Swedes and Danes, the husband who caught their wife in the act of adultery, might immediately kill her, and castrate the gallant." This came from a moralizing essay about the mythical "good old days." It argued that the current chastity laws were not strict enough and pointed to other communities that had stricter punishments. The writer claimed that the communities with stricter punishments had virtuous women that did not lose their chastity due to the imminent consequences.

In a similar article, in the December 1770 issue, H.T. wrote to *The Lady's Magazine* and expressed his disdain for women whom he described as "entitled to say free things" about matrimony, and who "had the courage to advance, that reformed rakes make the best husbands." H.T., "a sober modest man," argued that women did not favor men like himself, who were the ideal husbands; they preferred "reformed rakes." These were men who were former "bad boys" who committed immoral conduct such as

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<sup>7</sup> Joh, Coote and John Wheble. *The Lady's Magazine*, London: Printed for Robinson and Roberts, 1770-1771. September 1770 issue. 71.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

premarital sex. H.T. wrote this essay to counter this sentiment and argued that if women continued down this path of choosing “reformed rakes” rather than virtuous men as their husbands, their marriages would ultimately end in disaster. He warned that “a woman who gives her hand to one of these gentleman, will generally find in him a jealous, peevish husband, who will make her suffer for his iniquities.”<sup>9</sup> The editor of *The Lady’s Magazine* chose to include this essay in order to inform the readers of the magazine of the outcome that would occur if one chose a husband that had not been virtuous from the beginning.

H.T. submitted another letter in March of 1771, in which he argued that “novels and romances; the reading of which having a direct tendency to contaminate the minds of young ladies, and to be productive of very pernicious consequences in future life.” This essay warned women of the “noxious trash” they read and claimed the “novels and romances [were] the poison of youth, and the murder of souls, as sure as arsenic or ratsbane kills bodies.” These novels “give a romantic turn to the mind, that is often productive of great errors in judgment, and fatal mistakes in conduct.”<sup>10</sup> Middle class families provided their daughters with a limited formal education focused on literacy, dancing, music, and needlework.<sup>11</sup> This new market of literate women needed something to read, and novels were as popular as magazines. Novels of the eighteenth century were primarily for women and focused chiefly on romance and seduction. Ultimately, H.T. believed that *The Lady’s Magazine* was a virtuous platform for him to voice his discontent with novels, in hopes that the fair sex would choose different reading materials.

In the February 1771 issue, H.T. also submitted a letter that promoted matrimonial happiness. He argued that a woman should be virtuous if they wanted to “obtain a good [virtuous] husband.” In order for a woman to remain a virtuous wife she must remain devoted to her husband and should stay away from all things immoral. Women should only allow their “conjugal love to be expressed with such decency, delicacy and prudence, as that it may appear plainly, and thoroughly distinct from the designing fondness of an harlot.”<sup>12</sup> This letter warned women to remain faithful to their husbands because if they did not they would be considered a promiscuous woman.

Another cultural fear of the eighteenth century was that men would seduce pure women and cause them to forfeit their virginity. This, in the end, would lead them

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<sup>9</sup> John Coote and John Wheble. *The Lady’s Magazine*, London: Printed for Robinson and Roberts, 1770-1771. December 1770 issue. 211-212.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., March 1771 issue. 364-365.

<sup>11</sup> John Peter, Miller. "Eighteenth-Century Periodicals for Women." *History of Education Quarterly* 11, no. 3 (1971): 279-86.

<sup>12</sup> John Coote. and John Wheble. *The Lady’s Magazine*, London: Printed for Robinson and Roberts, 1770-1771. February 1771 issue. 317-318.

down a path of struggle, heartbreak, and in many cases, death. In the October 1770 issue of *The Lady's Magazine*, a correspondent wrote a poem that advised young women of the dangers they faced from rakes and deceptive men:

I write, my dear Nancy, to bid you beware  
Of some of the subtle fly sex,  
Whose study and pleasure is us to ensnare,  
To tease us, to vex, and perplex.  
Above all, my dear girl, shun the dissolute rake...  
He will vow, he will swear, his foul he will stake,  
But be sure that he means to deceive...  
They're too fond of their persons, of tinsel, and shew...  
...let your reason direct,  
Don't be caught by externals be sure,  
The internal beauties don't flight nor reject,  
For they lasting joys will secure.<sup>13</sup>

This poem describes an innocent young woman, Nancy, whose friend warns her of the kind of vain, deceptive man who may tempt her. The poem warns women about the "subtle sly" men who will trick them into temptation.<sup>14</sup> It also warns them about the predatory nature of men and how easy it is to lose their virtue to a man's seduction. It also urges her to look for a partner that is internally virtuous and pure, rather than to base her judgments on superficial beauty, because personal vanity can ultimately cause an eternity of unhappiness. The poem ultimately uses fear to perpetuate the narrative that women can easily lose their virtue and once it is gone their life will be filled with turmoil.

The May 1771 issue also included an essay on the month of May in which the female author warns that the month was "the most dangerous to our sex"<sup>15</sup> and that women should guard their hearts against seducers during this month because:

For thee, sweet month, the groves green  
Liveries wear,  
if not the first the fairest of the year;  
For thee the graces lead the dancing hours,  
And nature's ready pencil paints the flowers;

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<sup>13</sup> John Coote. and John Wheble. *The Lady's Magazine*, London: Printed for Robinson and Roberts, 1770-1771. October 1770 issue. 136.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., May 1771 issue. 468.

The sprightly May commands our youths to keep  
The vigils of her night, and breaks their sleeps;  
Each gentle breast with kindly warmth she moves,  
Inspires new flames, revives extinguished loves.<sup>16</sup>

This poem warned women of the month because this was the beginning of spring. The poem claims that the month of May is dangerous because of the fertile imagery of flowers blooming, nature becoming more colorful, and the warming weather. All this makes for a conducive environment for love and romance. Overall, these works on seduction carried the narrative that women were under continuous attack and must be vigilant in order to preserve their chastity and remain virtuous. These poems serve as a reminder to the reader that maintaining chastity and not being tricked by seducers is her responsibility.

A correspondent in the same volume also warned that a woman, regardless of her status as “lady, maid, wife, or widow, who boasts of her virtue and [her] honor, shall be immediately suspected of having made a false step.” It is also pertinent that “no lady should be complimented on her chastity who never was supposed to have had the question proposed to her.” If she is complimented on her chastity, then she may have had her virtue tempted in the past. Also, a “lady who is always shewing a fondness for her husband in public shall be positively charged with having, at that instant, a pretty fellow waiting for a private interview with her.”<sup>17</sup> The writer warned women of the societal expectations that were placed onto them if they wanted to remain virtuous. Women of the time had to be aware of the cultural ideas of a chaste and unchaste woman, and if they wanted to hold onto their status they had to assimilate to these ideas of what it meant to be a virtuous woman.

In the eighteenth century, courtships were largely entered around families maintaining their status with arranged marriages that met with parental approval. It was scandalous for a woman to be pregnant before marriage, and it would cause dishonor to the family of the pregnant woman.<sup>18</sup> The chaste woman had to think of her honor and social status before accepting a courtship. Similarly, the man also had to consider the woman’s social status because both families had to come from the same social class. While this was the reality in the eighteenth century, some pieces in *The Lady’s Magazine* altered the narrative by focusing solely on the virtue of the couple and their love for one another. This was depicted in *Miscellaneous Thoughts on Women from*

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Chris Roulston. *Narrating Marriage in Eighteenth-Century England and France*. S.I.: Routledge, 2016. 9, 72.

*the French*, which told the story of a prince marrying a virtuous woman who was not in the same social class, but he loved her because she “possessed every virtue.”<sup>19</sup>

In *The Lady's Magazine*, women were divided into two categories: the virtuous married wife versus the immoral woman who gave into vice. The women that retained their chastity were the ones who lived happy lives and possessed every virtue that could make a marriage last. It was important to seek virtue over beauty when considering marriage, because virtue “endures for ages—and is a greater ornament to the fair sex, than diamonds.”<sup>20</sup> In order for a woman to have a successful marriage, she must be honorable and have the prescribed feminine traits and qualities in order to retain her husband. Although virtue “will certainly secure esteem; but unfortunately, esteem alone will not make a happy marriage; passion must also be kept.”<sup>21</sup> A virtuous woman should also “look upon patience, resignation... calmness, fortitude, and serenity” in order to maintain her social status.<sup>22</sup>

In November 1770, Amelia wrote to *The Lady's Magazine* and expressed her perspective on how a woman could keep their husband. She stated that women should “not hope to bring back a husband by complaints, ill humor, or reproaches: the only means which promises success, are patience and softness: impatience sours and alienates hearts; softness leads them back to their duty.”<sup>23</sup> It is also suggested that women “study the taste of [their] husband, and endeavor to acquire a taste for those pleasures which he appears most to affect” in order to have a long-lasting marriage.<sup>24</sup>

In the April 1771 issue of the magazine it also promoted the idea that “he who would search for pearls must dive below,” in other words, if one wants to find a pure and moral woman, he must search for a woman who has virtuous attributes and must not only consider her beauty. A correspondent also warned women that if “refinements of the brain, and a few personal attractions are more considered by the generality of those who chuse their favorites, than the good qualities of the heart,” the relationship will inevitably fail because it was lust and not true love.<sup>25</sup> Again, this suggests that relationships should be based on virtue and morality, not just superficial beauty and lust.

In the February 1771 volume, the essay entitled *Daphne and Amintor or, Rural Simplicity*, described a couple that remained pure, and because of their chastity, were

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<sup>19</sup> John Coote and John Wheble. *The Lady's Magazine*, London: Printed for Robinson and Roberts, 1770-1771. September 1770. 65.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 65

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, November 1770 issue. 160

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, December 1770 issue. 212.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, November 1770 issue. 160.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, April 1771 issue. 419.

rewarded with marriage. Their love was “fervor of affection without the least mixture of vice.”<sup>26</sup> Not only were couples depicted as moral within marriage, a truly loyal wife remained so devoted to her husband that she would follow him in death. This was described in the poem *The Disconsolate Fair*, which was written by a young woman after she received a letter informing her of the death of her fiancée:

Of virtuous love. And is my charmer dead!...  
Lead me. Ye virgins to my move I go...  
My blood runs cold, my ling' ring pulse beats...  
Farwell, ye virgins, to my love I go.<sup>27</sup>

The woman commits suicide after her fiancée dies, which is consistent with the narrative that a truly virtuous woman dies of a broken heart. This poem supports the overall narrative that regardless of intent, a relationship that does not begin pure will end in devastation.

*The Lady's Magazine* chronicles women as maintaining their chastity, which results in their having a happy life. However, in the July 1771 volume, a correspondent wrote in to warn women that “a young lady in the bloom of youth, beauty, riches, and numberless other charms, can never be too cautious of her behavior, especially when in company with the young and gay of the opposite sex,” because “men are often the sole cause of women’s ruin and disgrace; which should oblige the; latter... to beware of the mean artifices and delusions of the former.”<sup>28</sup>

For example, in the November 1770 issue, a moral story was published. *The Miraculous History of the Origins of the Convent of Monforte in Spain*, told the story of the princess of Catalonia. The princess of Catalonia “retired quite alone to lead a life of prayer and penance.” During this time, she met a townsman named Guarino, and they grew closer with every visit, which led to the “devil’s scheme... and the princess began to swell about the hips.” Thinking of his “reputation for sanctity, which he had labored hard to acquire,” Guarino cut the throat of the princess and “secretly buried her body.” This story presented in the magazine perpetuates the belief that if a woman is not virtuous, bad things will happen to her, just like the princess. Later in the story, Guarino is punished by the pope to walk as a beast.<sup>29</sup> Ultimately, the story presents the

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., February 1771 issue. 321.

<sup>27</sup> John Coote. and John Wheble. *The Lady's Magazine*, London: Printed for Robinson and Roberts, 1770-1771. January 1771 issue. 278.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., July 1771 issue. 536.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., August 1770 issue. 25.



reader with an account that suggests premarital sex is followed by punishment, humiliation, and death.

In the same issue, another story that enumerated the consequences of immoral behavior was that of the Goddess Diana going to Margate because of rumors that the women there were not virtuous. Diana said to the crowd of women:

Tis chastity, ladies tis chastity;  
She that has that is clad in complete steel...  
So dear to Heav'n is saintly Chastity...  
By unchaste looks, loose gestures, and foul talk,  
Let's in defilement to the inward parts,  
The soul grows clotted by contagion.<sup>30</sup>

Once a woman loses her virginity, her soul will decay and her purity will be forever lost. The Goddess Diana also "proposed to the ladies to follow her, assuring them that the chaste would tread as firm on the surface of the sea as on the beach."<sup>31</sup> This was a test to see who remained pure because if a woman did not "she sunk as dead as a stone to the bottom." Ultimately this indicates that heaven knows the truth and if women slip-up they will be forever condemned as an unchaste woman.

Similarly, in the essay *Danger of Relying on the Promises of Men*, in the November 1770 issue, the writer described what happened to women who were successfully seduced by men and then married them:

poor weak woman swerves from virtue's rule...  
Softer paths of pleasure stray...  
...endless shame...  
In vain look back, on what she was before.  
She sets like stars, that fall to rise no more.<sup>32</sup>

This poem illustrates to the reader the turmoil that transpires if a woman does not remain a virgin until marriage. Even if she marries the seducer which should have "worked" she still suffers because she lost her virtue; she still has shame for being tricked.

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<sup>30</sup> John Coote. and John Wheble. *The Lady's Magazine*, London: Printed for Robinson and Roberts, 1770-1771. November 1770 issue. 167.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 168

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 174

Likewise, in the *Unfortunate Father, A Real History*, which appeared in the May 1771 issue, the writer describes the relationship between young Clindon and Lucilia, to whom he is attached because of her irregularities and beauty. After Clindon “strayed into the devious paths of vice... he was pierced with remorse and sorrow.” Yet, “one [passionate] look from Lucilia” caused him to fall “in the arms of pleasure.” Each time he would attempt to resist her she would give him “one of those tender looks which she knew could not be resisted.” In the end Clindon was punished and died proclaiming that he was “blind with passion.”<sup>33</sup>

In the February 1771 issue of the magazine, a reader submitted an essay that warns women to be mindful of their actions because if they act in a wicked way their action will be the “subject of everybody’s conversation; the magazine and newspaper will publish at length the whole affair, though a shock to modesty and decency.” The letter continued to encourage that women should attempt “to excel in every accomplishment try a thousand times, and a thousand ways to promotes domestic happiness, without the least return of kindness from [their] husbands, and without any applause, but from a consciousness of doing [their] duty.” The writer then argued that “husbands bring upon themselves by indifference” an unhappy wife that will seek affirmation elsewhere. The author of this letter hoped it would “have some good effect on the gentlemen who, if they studied their own true happiness— would seek it, and promote it, first at home.”<sup>34</sup> Overall, the author encouraged women to remain virtuous and warns men that their actions can cause their wives to stray from a virtuous path.

*The Lady’s Magazine* included many poems, fictional prose, and epistolary exchanges that had a common discourse of feminine modesty. This was a consistent message throughout the periodical that communicated the importance of female chastity and its connection to social disgrace if virtue was lost. The magazine provided an in-depth look into the cultural fears of women that lost their virginity in the eighteenth century. It also described the chaste and unchaste woman and the consequences that seduction had in her life. Overall, the scholarly research of women’s periodicals provides a historical window into the lives of women, the role of women in society, and the role periodicals had in influencing the lives of eighteenth-century women.

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., May 1771 issue. 446-448.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 317.