

‘Only the Fellows and Scholars are allowed here; the gravel is the place for me.’

‘How have female writers been inspired by limitations placed on their educational experiences?’

If you were to take a woman from 11th Century Constantinople, 17th Century Europe, 19th Century Britain and 21st Century Pakistan, one thing they would all undoubtedly have in common would be the limitations placed on their education by patriarchal society. However, if there is one method through which women have overcome these limitations, it is through writing. Writing has become a medium for rebellion for women throughout time. Their limited educational experiences have become not just an obstacle to overcome, but an important remnant of women’s history by which so many have been inspired.

Perhaps the greatest example of a woman writing in defiance of the limitations placed upon her education is found in the Byzantine Princess Anna Comnena. Comnena was in line for the Byzantine throne until the birth of her brother John in 1087, yet her education was of a phenomenal standard for a woman at the time. However, the frustration came when Comnena was unable to *use* her education – establishing a theme of women’s education that would be replicated for centuries: women were given an education but not trusted to use it. In Comnena’s case, she decided she was not content with her education going to waste, and furthered her own knowledge. With the assistance of a palace eunuch, she began secretly studying Greek epics – a form of literature seen as ‘unsafe’ for women to learn as they could not be Christianised. This early, secret love for the epic would become one of the most important parts of Comnena’s identity throughout history – she is primarily remembered as a historian and writer of an epic herself, *The Alexiad*, telling the story of the father she idolised. It is especially interesting that Comnena utilised the singular part of her education which had been limited, perhaps suggesting that women in history have used writing as a rebellion against those who have denied them sufficient education. The existence of *The Alexiad* contrasts itself – Comnena wrote a reverent dedication to her father’s works whilst formatting it in a way that was forbidden to her as a woman by that same father. However, through the format, Comnena shows herself not just to be a writer but a historian, widely named as the first female historian in Europe. Much of what we know about Byzantine Society comes from *The Alexiad*, and that is thanks to Comnena’s determination to defy the limitations placed upon her education.

Epics have similarly been a source for limitations on women’s education in the modern age, especially when not a single woman had translated a Greek epic until 2018 when Emily Wilson translated *The Odyssey*. Wilson’s translation was called ‘fresh, crisp and thoughtful,’¹ and attempted to tackle the centuries of sexism shown by translators of the epic. This ‘freshness’ is addressed by Wilson in the introduction to *The Odyssey*, and says she tried to ‘avoid importing contemporary types of sexism into this ancient poem.’ Many translations of the *Odyssey*, notably those of 20th Century university scholars such as Munro and Allan, have Helen call herself a ‘dog,’ or ‘dog-faced’² in place of a Greek word which is understood to have more nuanced metaphorical undertones. Lattimore goes even as far as to have Helen call herself ‘slut that I am,’³ a shockingly outdated and even incorrect translation of the original Greek. Wilson herself uses the more feminist and more accurate ‘hounded,’⁴ showing her skill not only as a translator, but as a writer. Wilson’s metaphorical mastery could have been driven by the previous decades of simple description of women in the epic by men, and she has been inspired to defy these tropes through a more lyrical translation of Homer’s works. There is also a suggestion by Wilson in her condemnation of these derogatory translations that it is society’s allowing of these ‘contemporary types of sexism’⁵ in modern translations of ancient epic that place limitations on women’s education. For centuries, men have been telling the stories of the women of the ancient world, and it has taken nearly 3,000 years for a woman to announce that she is finally attempting to take matters into her own hands. Women have been continually described with the derogatory terms

¹ Natalie Haynes (2017), *Finally, the Translation the Odyssey Deserves*, The ‘I’

² Graver, Margaret (1995), *Dog-Helen and Homeric Insult*, Classical Antiquity

³ Lattimore, Richmond, (1967) *The Odyssey of Homer*

⁴ Wilson, Emily (2018) *The Odyssey*

⁵ Wilson, Emily (2018) *The Odyssey (Translator’s Note)*

in translations by men, taught by men, in an epic written by men and about men. Wilson highlighted that none of her Classics professors at Balliol College, Oxford, were women and called the subject a 'boys' club,'⁶ yet insists this only propelled her determination to break through in the field rather than held her back. The epic (no pun intended) limits placed on women in their education have, as seen with Anna Comnena, led to a sex more determined than ever to make the genre of the epic their own.

Female writers in the renaissance period seemed particularly hindered in their educational opportunities, seemingly living in a time of diminished educational mobility for women, which would only gradually improve. Similarly to Anna Comnena's Byzantine world, women's education in Tudor and Stuart England was often largely based on religion. Elements of learning which couldn't be Christianised were forbidden to women. However, in the case of writers such as Catherine Parr, final wife of Henry VIII, some women used this solely-religious education to their advantage. Parr published *Lamentations of a Sinner* in 1547, having to wait until after her husband had died, as it was the limit not on her education but on her reputation which meant her work was not suitable for an English Queen to publish. What is particularly interesting about Parr's only work was that it was a *dramatization* of the experience of Christians, rather than a sermon or a psalm. This could be a suggestion that many women in the past have been inspired by the limits on their education by using what they had been given and pushing it to the limits. In this way, Parr can be seen as the reverse of Anna Comnena – Comnena used a form of education forbidden to her in order to praise her father, whereas Parr utilised the education she had been offered by her father to explore a skill before discouraged for women.

Gender continued to hinder women in their education throughout the Early Modern period, even for aristocratic writer Mary Wroth. Best known for works such as *Urania* and *Love's Victory*, Wroth used her writing as a way to break free from the limitations placed on her education, specifically in her relationships to other human beings. As an aristocratic woman in Tudor England, Wroth would have been educated alone by her mother or a governess, likely isolated from other girls in her childhood. Therefore, it is likely that the inspiration for *Love's Friendship* came from this limitation of company, as the play explores the sense of community women feel due to their collective marginalisation and the female friendships Wroth would have likely been deprived of. Further, there is also an exploration of desire in *Love's Friendship*, one of the earliest examples of a woman taking control of her sexuality – even if tamely. Sexual education was lacking to the point of non-existence in Stuart England. Wroth's presentation of women entering loving relationships in *Love's Victory* would have been shocking to her 1620 audience. In fact, many women began to write of love and desire in the Early Modern period, slowly becoming more bold in their declarations of sexual passion (Aphra Behn wrote famously sexual poetry, even 'To the fair Clorinda' – a 1688 poem exploring her sapphic desire for a 'fair, lovely maid.'⁷) yet there is very little suggestion that sexual education increased in quality – whilst the educational experience remained the same, the inspiration the women drew from the flaws in it became more of an influence on their work. The Early Modern period saw women writing more than ever, yet Virginia Woolf would later ask 'why Elizabethan women did not write poetry?'⁸ and argued that there was no outlet for their expression. This is simply untrue – poets such as Isabella Whitney and Aemilia Layner were especially active in the Elizabethan period. Sadly, Woolf exposes an unfortunate truth – no matter how women attempted to defy the limitations placed on their education, they were inevitably held back by the society which placed those limitations on them.

The 18th and 19th Centuries saw the respect of the novel as an art form increase, and women began to become more avid writers than ever. Women were still vastly limited in their education in comparison to their male peers, yet some of the most famous novelists and writer-philosophers emerged in this period. Mary Wollstonecraft, often cited as the pioneer of feminist theory, published *A Vindication of*

⁶ Mason, Wyatt. Accessed 27th Feb 2022, *The First Women to Translate 'The Odyssey' into English*, The New York Times. Published 2nd Nov 2017. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/02/magazine/the-first-woman-to-translate-the-odyssey-into-english.html>

⁷ Behn, Aphra (1688) *To the Fair Clorinda*

⁸ Woolf, Virginia (1922) *A Room of One's Own*

the Rights of Woman in 1792, undoubtedly taking inspiration from the limitations placed on her education. Her promise of ‘I do not wish for women to have power over men; but over themselves,’⁹ is still as resonant as ever today. This ‘power’ Wollstonecraft wished for women to have could have likely come in the form of writing, as writing gave women control over literature and their own stories. The critical reception of Wollstonecraft’s work was initially favourable, but she was later vilified and discredited by the press. Yet this did not prevent novelists in the succeeding decades from publishing novels which, through a modern day lens, could be seen as feminist fiction. Jane Austen, one of only two women in the Guardian’s top 10 of the ‘100 best novels of all time,’¹⁰ undoubtedly drew from real life experiences in her novels. These experiences included time at a school near Reading run by a Mrs Latournelle, generally believed to be a wholly incompetent teacher who was jolly and motherly but did not place much emphasis on education. Compared to the education her male relatives received (her brother and father both attended Oxford colleges) Austen would have undoubtedly had a lower standard of education to them. However, very few of her characters attend schools, Harriet Smith in *Emma* being the rare example, and she tends to favour her heroines being home-educated, perhaps suggesting that her experiences at Mrs Latournelle’s school in her childhood inspired her belief that education begins at home. Her wry sense of humour also seemed to develop in her teenage years with ‘*The History of England*’, often believed to be her first work of satire, and this humour likely came about to fill the boredom of her days of non-education. Austen seemed to continue her education throughout her life through her writing, exploring the wit of woman through Elizabeth Darcy, the morality through Fanny Price and the cleverness through Emma Woodhouse. It could be argued, therefore, that women are inspired to write as a way of taking their education into their own hands.

Education has undoubtedly improved from the 19th Century in which Austen wrote, yet the limitations on women’s educational experiences and opportunities have continued to be the making of many women’s careers as writers. Malala Yousafzai, who lived under a Taliban-controlled Pakistan in 2012, became famous after her attempts to access education in Pakistan left her with a gunshot wound to the head. Since then, she has become an inspirational speaker, as well as a writer, releasing ‘I am Malala’ in 2013. Malala was undoubtedly inspired by the limits on her educational experiences, and the subtitle of her book ‘the girl who stood up for education and was shot,’ gives an insight into how little the world has changed regarding women’s education – in fact, in some respects, it has regressed. Comnena and Wroth and Austen did not have to put their lives on the line for their education – Malala did. Much of her activism has come through the form of empowering women, and as well as telling her own story, ‘I am Malala’ also spread the story of the women she learned alongside in Taliban-controlled Pakistan. In an interview with British Vogue in 2021, Malala spoke of how women’s education is improving lives, saying ‘I know the power that a young girl carries in her heart when she has a vision and a mission,¹¹’ – her message is one that every other female writer has been trying to scream out for centuries: nothing is more dangerous than an educated woman, and that is why the patriarchy has tried and failed to put them down. This fear men seem to have of educated women has only inspired them to use the pen as their weapon, changing the world one word at a time.

The patriarchy has made many mistakes throughout its too-long existence. Limiting women’s education has been perhaps its most short-sighted. If a woman is given an education, she will use it to write. If she is denied one, she will obtain one to write. No matter how limited women’s education is officially, we are a resilient sex, and not only do women overcome the educational limitations placed upon them, they are used as inspiration time and time again, a motivator and method of rebellion to prove that that a woman who writes is both terrifying and free.

⁹ Wollstonecraft, Mary (1792) *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*

¹⁰ McCrum, Robert. Accessed 1st Mar 2022, *The 100 Best Novels Written in English: The Full List*. The Guardian. Published 17th Aug 2015. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/aug/17/the-100-best-novels-written-in-english-the-full-list>

¹¹ Yousafzai, Malala (in an interview with Sirin Kale). Accessed 1st Mar 2022. ‘*I Know the Power a Young Girl Carries in her Heart: The Extraordinary Life of Malala*’. British Vogue. Published 1st Jun 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.vogue.co.uk/news/article/malala-vogue-interview>

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