

**Introduction to *The Rational Lovers***

**Physical Book**

The copy of *The Rational Lovers* at Chawton House Library is duodecimo sized, typical for novels of the period and part of the commercialisation of literature in the eighteenth century. It is also evidence of the growing trend over the course of the eighteenth century towards smaller and more portable fiction, and typical of a circulating library publication. The ESTC describes the novel as ‘with an advertisement, in the first volume, by F. and J. Noble, rejecting the claims of the “London Magazine” reviewer and with three leaves of advertisements at the end of the second volume’. The copy of *The Rational Lovers* from ECCO has both of these, but the advertisements are missing from the Chawton copy. Unusually, the Chawton copy is bound in unadorned vellum boards, which is not typical of other books at this period in the library, which predominantly have leather, decorated, or marbled covers. In the eighteenth-century vellum was a cheaper binding material, on a level with paper covers<sup>1</sup>, which was also durable to handling being both sturdy and supple<sup>2</sup>. Plain, undecorated vellum is also unusual, with all examples of vellum binding on the BLDB having some form of decoration on the cover or spine. An example of a similar binding to that of *The Rational Lovers* can be found in David Pearson’s *Books as History* as a comparison with a more elaborate volume. Although

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<sup>1</sup> Giles Barber, ‘Around the Padeloup and Derome Workshops’, in *Eloquent Witnesses: bookbindings and their history: a volume of essays dedicated to the memory of Dr. Phiroze Randeria*, ed. Mirjam M. Foot (London: Bibliographical Society, 2004), pp. 171- 205 (172).

<sup>2</sup> Jan Storm Van Leeuwen, ‘Bookbindings: Depictions, Owners, Contents’, in *Eloquent Witnesses: bookbindings and their history: a volume of essays dedicated to the memory of Dr. Phiroze Randeria*, ed. Mirjam M. Foot (London: Bibliographical Society, 2004), pp. 30-52 (37).

this book is from an earlier period (1604), it does support the hypothesis that the purchaser of this book being 'less well-to-do, had to accept something plainer'<sup>3</sup>. The fact that one has to look to an earlier period for a similar binding also suggests it was old fashioned by 1769. A previous owner has carved a number (10457) on to the cover of volume one, which is likely to be a library reference number and supports the idea that it was part of someone's private collection. The lack of decoration on the cover, the absence of any frontispiece and limited printer's ornaments further suggests that this is a more humble novel and one not highly valued, which is expected giving that it is a Noble publication. The good condition of the book, the spine, and lack of annotation and folded corners, indicates that this copy was perhaps not much read.

### **Publishing History**

The novel was published in 1769 and priced at 5s, sewed, in all the advertisements, which was typical for a two volume novel of this period<sup>4</sup>. However, James Raven takes the price of the novel from its review, which prices it at 6s<sup>5</sup>. Unlike many novels of the time which claimed to be true in order to boost their sales, on the title page *The Rational Lovers* openly declares itself 'A Novel'.

### ***Authorship: Anonymous***

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<sup>3</sup> David Pearson, *Books as History: The Importance of Books beyond their Texts* (London: the British Library and Oak Knoll Press, 2008), 149.

<sup>4</sup> *Lloyd's Evening Post* (London: England), 1<sup>st</sup> March, 1769 – 3<sup>rd</sup> March, 1769, Issue 1819.

<sup>5</sup> 'The Rational Lovers: or the History of Sir Charles Leusum, and Mrs Frances Fermor', *The Monthly Review*, 40 (March 1769), p.259.

The disproportionate amount of female to male characters and the focus on predominantly female issues, concerns about marriage and independence and similarities with the ideas and principles of a female literary intellectual movement does suggest that this novel is likely to be by a woman. A large part of the humour of the novel is directed at Sir Charles' love-struck behaviour, he looks at Mrs Fermor adoringly but she just thinks he is ill<sup>6</sup>; this sarcastic look at male behaviour is more likely to be written by a female author. Nonetheless, this is impossible to prove and can only be suggested from the social context and the internal evidence of the text. The publishing history of the novel also has to be taken into account. According to Edward Jacob's analysis of Jan Fergus's study of Samuel Clay's circulating library, 'circulating library publishers were 5.7 times more likely to publish works by anonymous authors' and '1.8 times more likely to publish works by female authors'<sup>7</sup>. This disproportionate amount of anonymous texts has much to do with the stigma of writing for circulating library publishers which by the mid-eighteenth century were associated with the general disapproval of writing for money and 'crass pandering to a vulgar audience'<sup>8</sup>. Therefore, *The Rational Lovers* is typical of circulating library publications in its anonymity and the fact that circulating library publishers published more novels by women than men also supports the hypothesis of a female author.

### ***Method of Publication: Circulating Libraries***

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<sup>6</sup> Anon, *The rational lovers: or, the history of Sir Charles Leusum, and Mrs. Frances Fermor. In two volumes. ...* Vol. Volume 1. London, MDCCLXIX. [1769]. Eighteenth Century Collections Online. Gale. University of Southampton. <<http://find.galegroup.com/ecco/infomark.do?&contentSet=ECCOArticles&type=multi page&tabID=T001&prodId=ECCO&docId=CW109431913&source=gale&userGroupName=unisoton&version=1.0&docLevel=FASCIMILE>> [accessed 16 Dec. 2010], p.119 .All subsequent references will be to this edition and will be included in parenthesis with volume number in the text.

<sup>7</sup> Edward Jacobs, 'Anonymous Signatures: Circulating Libraries, Conventionality, and the Production of Gothic Romances', *English Literary History*, 62.3 (1995), pp.603-629 (606).

<sup>8</sup> Edward Jacobs, p.609.

One of the interesting aspects of the text, and an important one for positioning it in the eighteenth-century literary marketplace, is publication by, and for, the circulating libraries of John and Francis Noble. In order to better place *The Rational Lovers* in its social and historical context, some remarks on circulating libraries more generally are needed.

Circulating libraries were 'crucial in boosting the consumption of books as ephemeral entertainment, commodities driven by fashion' which led to the massive increase of novel production after 1780<sup>9</sup>. This increase in the commercial production of literature by bookshops and circulating libraries deeply disturbed eighteenth-century critics as they believed it to have immoral effects<sup>10</sup>. Ian Watt perpetuates this discourse by arguing that after the great novels of Richardson and Fielding and the boom in circulating libraries 'the Grub street hacks had been set to writing novels [...] on a considerable scale by such booksellers and circulating library proprietors as Francis and John Noble'<sup>11</sup>. This illustrates concerns about the way in which fiction was produced the circulating libraries, which not only brought the libraries, but also the novel itself, into disrepute. Critics 'found the circulating library novel flimsy, immoral and tedious' and this led to 'a real conviction that the novel was played out'<sup>12</sup>.

However, the circulating library still has an important place in the history of the novel as it played a large part in the expansion of the literary audience in the

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<sup>9</sup> E.J. Clery, Caroline Franklin, Peter Garside, 'Introduction', in *Authorship, Commerce and the Public: scenes of writing 1750-1850*, ed. by E.J. Clery, Caroline Franklin, Peter Garside (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), pp. 1-26 (14).

<sup>10</sup> James Raven, *British Fiction, 1750-1770: a chronological check-list of prose fictions printed in Britain and Ireland* (Newark, Del.: University of Delaware Press, 1987), p.2.

<sup>11</sup> Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1963), p.57.

<sup>12</sup> J.M.S. Tompkins, p.3-4.

eighteenth-century. Although they were still only affordable by the 'more substantial members of the propertied classes' they were still 'particularly effective in expanding the market for fiction, assisting those eager to find ways of quickly and cheaply obtaining the latest fashionable book, reading it, and passing on to the next'<sup>13</sup>. The success of mid-century booksellers and authors who 'created and sustained the fashion for reading novels' meant that in 1769, the year in which *The Rational Lovers* was published, the number of new titles and reprints was double that of 1750<sup>14</sup>.

### ***Bookseller/ Publisher: The Noble Brothers***

According to James Raven the Noble Brothers were in the book trade from 1737 to 1759; however, the British Book Trade Index gives their trading dates as 1739 to 1792. This discrepancy is due to the fact that John and Francis traded together from the premises in Soho until 1759, when Francis moved to set up separate business in Holborn, the Soho business continuing all the while<sup>15</sup>. In either case, during that time they 'published over two hundred novels and miscellanies, sold many other titles, established the two leading circulating libraries for modish London and French literature, and provided dozens of London and provincial libraries with their wares'<sup>16</sup>. In 1754 they set up a three tiered business, each brother operating from different establishments, 'as booksellers, publishers, and the keepers of circulating libraries'<sup>17</sup>. From 1760 to 1769, the period in which *The Rational Lovers*

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<sup>13</sup> James Raven, *British Fiction, 1750-1770*, p. 29 and p.28.

<sup>14</sup> James Raven, *British Fiction, 1750-1770*, p.7-8.

<sup>15</sup> James Raven, *The Business of Books: Booksellers and the English Book Trade, 1450-1850* (New Haven Conn.; London: Yale University Press, 2007), p.189.

<sup>16</sup> James Raven, 'The Noble Brothers and Popular Publishing 1737-89', *The Library (Transactions of the Bibliographical Society)*, vol. s6-12 (4) (1990), pp. 295-345 (293).

<sup>17</sup> James Raven, 'The Noble Brothers and Popular Publishing 1737-89', p. 302.

was published, they were responsible for 3.7% of all book sales in England and Ireland<sup>18</sup>. Although not situated in the main bookselling district, in Holborn, Francis Noble was 'surrounded by new firms, selling luxury goods, pandering to new tastes'<sup>19</sup>. This corresponds to the main selling point of the Noble's libraries, 'their claim to stock the very latest and most talked-about literature'<sup>20</sup>. Francis Noble's catalogue promised 'New Books Bought as soon as Published' [see appendix B], emphasising the benefits of circulating libraries with their abundance of 'fashionable, toss-aside literature available'<sup>21</sup>. As *The Rational Lovers* would have been amongst their number, this suggests that it was not intended as a serious read but as light entertainment.

James Raven describes the typical clientele of the Nobles' bookshops and libraries as 'predominantly young and female, many of whom had gained by marriage or an allowance a modest personal income, certainly exceeding £20 a year but probably not £100'<sup>22</sup>. It can be reasonably certainly assumed that this is the intended readership for *The Rational Lovers* as circulating library titles were chosen by 'experienced eighteenth-century proprietors based upon what they knew of thought their clientele wanted to read'<sup>23</sup>. However, not all of this evidence can be taken at face value as more recent scholarship has shown that 'men were equally avid consumers of all fictional genres'<sup>24</sup>. Furthermore, contemporary representations of Francis Noble's circulating library are ambiguous about the

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<sup>18</sup> James Raven, *British Fiction, 1750-1770*, p.35.

<sup>19</sup> James Raven, 'The Noble Brothers and Popular Publishing 1737-89'

<sup>20</sup> James Raven, 'The Noble Brothers and Popular Publishing 1737-89', p.312.

<sup>21</sup> James Raven, 'The Noble Brothers and Popular Publishing 1737-89', p.312.

<sup>22</sup> James Raven, *British Fiction, 1750-1770*, p.31.

<sup>23</sup> Edward Jacobs, p.605.

<sup>24</sup> Simon Dickie, 'The Forgotten Best-Sellers of Early English Fiction' in *Cruelty and Laughter: Forgotten Comic Literature and the Unsentimental Eighteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, forthcoming 2011), p. 359.

gender of their target audience. Although the woman does seem to be the focal point of the image, it is interesting that even if the stacking and standing men are taken to be employees rather than patrons, they still outnumber the female figure three to one [see appendix B]. It is extremely unlikely that they would have chosen to publish a book that was unlikely to be read by their core customer base, as publishing was risky, requiring heavy investment, as if a book did not sell it would take a long time to make a return<sup>25</sup>. As the Nobles had to diversify their businesses, selling ‘Ridley’s famous asthmatic pills’<sup>26</sup> as well as ‘portraits painted in miniature by B. Wilding’<sup>27</sup>, this would suggest they could not make enough money from books alone but had to supplement their income.

By the 1750s they were ‘notorious as the greatest “novel manufacturers”’ in the country<sup>28</sup>, as evidenced in contemporary texts, such as Charles Jenner’s *Town Eclogues* from 1772:

‘Why not engage with *Noble* or with *Bell*,  
To weave thin novels that are sure to sell?-  
Thrice happy author, who, with little skill,  
In two short weeks can two short volumes fill.’<sup>29</sup>

In *The Egg, or the Memoirs of Gregory Giddy, Esq.*, Giddy is being persuaded by his friend that ‘the booksellers pay mechanically at the rate of so much per sheet [...] Sit down and write as fast as you can [...] If it happens to be nonsense, you may be sure

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<sup>25</sup> James Raven, *British Fiction, 1750-1770*, p.39.

<sup>26</sup> The Public Advertiser (14/9/1779)

<sup>27</sup> The Public Advertiser (16/9/1769)

<sup>28</sup> James Raven, *British Fiction, 1750-1770*, p.36.

<sup>29</sup> Charles Jenner, *Town Eclogues* (1772) cited in J.M.S. Tompkins, p.1.

it will meet with a kind reception from the two *Noble Brothers*'<sup>30</sup>. Clearly contemporaries of the Nobles thought little either of the authors that wrote for them, or the literary quality of what they produced.

### ***Reception of The Rational Lovers***

There is one review of the novel from March 1769 in *The Monthly Review*, and, while not as obviously derogatory as the reviews of other Noble publications, it is nonetheless not a positive one. Rather than explicitly attacking the novel, it sarcastically summarises the plot. The reviewer writes that Sir Charles' 'hopeless love reduced him to the point of death: she [Mrs Fermor] then graciously submitted to become a lady of fortune, in pure compassion to the dying swain; and so he recovered, and was married'<sup>31</sup>. The reviewer makes a judgement on Mrs Fermor's behaviour perhaps echoing contemporary opinions of women who were upwardly socially mobile through marriage. However, the reviewer ignores the very real concerns which would have prevented her, and other women, from marrying, such as the desire to remain independent (as discussed below). The fact that the review completely summarises the plot may have deterred purchasers and borrowers as it completely obliterates all narrative tension in the novel. Perhaps this explains why there was only one edition of the novel, despite its extensive advertisement. A search of the British Library database of British Newspapers 1600-1900 reveals nine advertisements in six different weekly publications between the 7<sup>th</sup> March 1769 and the 28<sup>th</sup> October 1769. The fact that numerous advertisements were needed over a

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<sup>30</sup> Anonymous, *The Egg, or the Memoirs of Gregory Giddy, Esq.*, cited in J.M.S. Tompkins, p.8.

<sup>31</sup> 'The Rational Lovers: or the History of Sir Charles Leusum, and Mrs Frances Fermor', *The Monthly Review*, 40 (March 1769), p.259.

period of a few months indicates that copies of the novel were not snapped up straight away by patrons, and the Nobles may have had a hard time getting rid of all their copies. This coupled with the plain paratext and lack of illustrations and decoration, indicates that it was not highly thought of in its time. Lowly reception is further corroborated by the cheapness and plainness of the binding of the copy in Chawton House Library (see above).

### **Plot Synopsis**

Sir Charles is taken in by a beautiful young woman, Miss Bloom, who loves to be seen and admired and is only marrying him for his title and fortune. Mrs Fermor, Miss Bloom's older and more secluded companion, writes to Miss Bloom questioning her motives. The letter is discovered by Sir Charles who then becomes acquainted with Mrs Fermor as a consequence. He falls in love with her for her compassion, especially for the poor, as well as her intelligence and her rationality. She refuses to marry him as she thinks he is too young and handsome for her. Sir Charles travels to town to try and get over her and meets Miss Hill, to whom he becomes engaged. She is then forced by her parents to give him up for a man of higher rank. Mrs Fermor tells Sir Charles of her unhappy marriage to an aged libertine to please her mother and father. Although he tells her that she could marry him and keep her independence, she declines again and he returns to town. Whilst there his friend Mr Brundel introduces Sir Charles to an upper-class prostitute, Lucy, who falls in love with him and with whom he lives for several weeks. However, he worries what Mrs Fermor would think of his behaviour, leaves Lucy £500 to help her out of her way of

life, and returns home to the country. Lucy follows him and attempts to kill him. Nonetheless, he still behaves compassionately and Mrs Fermor's resolve begins to weaken. Sir Charles nearly dies and Mrs Fermor realises she has feelings towards him. They are married and have a happy relationship as it is founded in reason rather than passion.

### **Political and Social Significance of the Novel**

The humble packaging, lowly publishing history and unadorned style of *The Rational Lovers* does its content a disservice, as it sheds light on important eighteenth-century social and commercial discourses. To dismiss this text as merely a production of the Nobles' novel factory would be to ignore its place in contemporary social and political discourses as 'trash can help us to situate texts more fully in their time – in the literary field in which they were produced'<sup>32</sup>. It is also important to take into account that 'even the most discerning readers purchased and enjoyed the notorious trash fiction of the age'; for example, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu read 'all sorts of trash from Noble and other fiction factories'<sup>33</sup>. The novel occupies an interesting and unusual position in the eighteenth century literary marketplace; the author is writing from the position of an intellectual women's movement, yet the novel is produced by publishers considered the lowest of the low and, as evidenced above, not known for the literary quality of their output.

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<sup>32</sup> Simon Dickie, p.367.

<sup>33</sup> Simon Dickie, p.363, 361.

### ***Importance of the paratext: Feud with the Editor of the London Magazine***

Part of the Nobles' notoriety stemmed from their on ongoing feud with Robert Baldwin, 'editor of the *London Magazine*, and bookseller at the Rose in Paternoster Row'<sup>34</sup>. A significant part of this feud takes place in the Advertisement and Rejoinder in the paratext of *The Rational Lovers*. The Nobles savagely attack the *London Magazine* for 'condemning in general and abusive terms, every novel we publish, and, as we have reason to believe, frequently without reading them'. They go on to dismiss the accusation that they 'keep any writers or writer in pay' arguing that 'all we have hithero published has been sent to us unsolicited from their authors, without any stipulated pay'. This directly responds to the condemnations of the Noble brothers and their publications in the *London Magazine*. An example of this can be found in the 1768 review of *The Injured Daughter, or The History of Miss Maria Beaumont*, which writes of the 'Messrs Noble' that

'they most commonly serve the interest of their country in promoting the manufacture of paper – to say nothing of the numerous hands they keep employed in the business of authorship; to find fault with their novels therefore would be to prevent the employment of the poor'.

Here the Nobles are accused of keeping hacks in their employ and publishing novels which are worth nothing more than the paper they are written on. In common with the Nobles' contemporaries, J.M.S. Tompkins is sceptical about the Nobles' claims to the contrary, writing only that 'this was very convenient for the Nobles'<sup>35</sup>. The Editor of the *London Magazine* also replies dismissing their indignant reply:

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<sup>34</sup> James Raven, 'The Noble Brothers and Popular Publishing 1737-89', p.304.

<sup>35</sup> J.M.S Tompkins, p.23.

‘Ignorance and Folly (like *J. and F. Noble*) are relations, appear always together, and live in a Circulating Library [...] He therefore informs the *Nobles*, that he holds them in very high contempt; that, in general, their Novels are the worst of all Novels.’<sup>36</sup>

The sheer volume of negative reviews of the Nobles’ publications is indicative of the fact that ‘reviewing a Noble novel seems to have become a sport’ with reviewers competing to write the most scathing review<sup>37</sup>. However, it is true that no publicity is bad publicity, with their ‘shameless skill for self-advertisement’<sup>38</sup> almost all Noble novels receiving critical comment at a time when most novels were barely mentioned in the monthlies<sup>39</sup>. The same is likely to be true of their ongoing public feud with Robert Baldwin as their names were a constant feature in the journals and periodicals<sup>40</sup>.

Therefore, the paratext provides interesting historical and social context for both *The Rational Lovers*, Circulating Libraries and the wider eighteenth-century marketplace, by highlighting contemporary concerns that the novel was declining in quality. It can be assumed that as a Noble publication, *The Rational Lovers* would not have been seen as of high literary value or quality; it would have been considered the lowest of the low, trash literature.

### ***Intertextuality with other eighteenth-century texts***

*The Rational Lovers* was influenced by Richardson’s *Pamela* in its elevation of a humble, virtuous female protagonist, both of whom reform the men who love

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<sup>36</sup> ‘Advertisement’, in *London Magazine, or, Gentleman’s monthly intelligencer*, 42 (January 1773), p.52.

<sup>37</sup> James Raven, ‘The Noble Brothers and Popular Publishing 1737-89’, p.307.

<sup>38</sup> James Raven, ‘The Noble Brothers and Popular Publishing 1737-89’, p.307.

<sup>39</sup> James Raven, ‘The Noble Brothers and Popular Publishing 1737-89’, p.307.

<sup>40</sup> James Raven, ‘The Noble Brothers and Popular Publishing 1737-89’, p.307.

them through their intellect, and subsequently climb the social ladder through marriage. Sir Charles thanks Mrs Fermor for 'the recovery of my senses' (vol.1 p.58) as a result of her advice, and her suggestion that he look in private rather than public places for a wife (vol.1 p.75) helps him escape the coquettish young women who are only after his fortune. However, unlike Pamela, Mrs Fermor maintains her power and autonomy throughout and her relationship with Sir Charles is always on her terms. In common with bluestocking texts such as Sarah Scott's *Agreeable Ugliness*<sup>41</sup> and *Millennium Hall*<sup>42</sup>, *The Rational Lovers* moves away from accounts of 'feminine virtue and female beauty' and towards an 'individuating discourse on propriety and morality'<sup>43</sup>. Mrs Fermor is 'not handsome' but she is 'amiable' (vol.1 p.4); there is a striking similarity to the heroine of *Agreeable Ugliness*, as both women 'could not have been said to have any thing striking' (vol.1 p.4), apart from their eyes. The same is true for the ladies of *Millennium Hall* with the focus of the description of the ladies on their plain appearance and their skills and personal merits.

Leading by example, Mrs Fermor encourages Sir Charles to be generous and compassionate to the poor and needy. He declares that "' I never was so affected [...] as at the meeting of these unhappy people, who are, I verily believe, a worthy couple [...] they drew tears from my eyes, and every shilling from my pocket'" (vol.1 p.56). This resonates with another important eighteenth-century text, Henry Mackenzie's

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<sup>41</sup> Sarah Scott, *Agreeable ugliness: Or, The triumph of the graces. Exempified in the real life and fortunes of a young lady of distinction*, Dublin, [1769?]. [Eighteenth Century Collections Online](#). Gale. University of Southampton.

<sup>42</sup> Sarah Scott, *A description of Millenium Hall and the country adjacent* (Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Press, c1995).  
<<http://find.galegroup.com/ecco/infomark.do?&contentSet=ECCOArticles&type=multipage&tabID=T001&prodId=ECCO&docId=CB127936463&source=gale&userGroupName=unisoton&version=1.0&docLevel=FASCIMILE>> [accessed 16 Dec. 2010].

<sup>43</sup> Robert W. Jones, *Gender and the Formation of Taste in Eighteenth Century Britain: the analysis of beauty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p.11, 156.

*Man of Feeling*, who travels to London and back again, giving tears and alms to the poor he meets along the way<sup>44</sup>.

### ***The Bluestocking Circle***

A bluestocking is defined as 'a scholarly or intellectual woman [from the blue worsted stockings worn by members of an eighteenth-century literary society]'<sup>45</sup>.

The Bluestocking Circle gathered in the homes of Elizabeth Montagu, Elizabeth Vesey and Frances Boscawen in London, hostesses who 'replaced popular amusements and alcohol with the more refined pursuits of literary conversation and tea drinking'<sup>46</sup>.

### ***Bluestockings and Marriage***

In the eighteenth-century the ideal woman of the middling classes was 'both man's equal and man's subject in companionate marriage'<sup>47</sup>; Mrs Fermor is presented as an ideal woman and has a relationship with Sir Charles based on mutual understanding and respect. Mrs Fermor's first marriage represents the complete opposite to this idealised union; she marries an aged libertine who has squandered his fortune and became infirm as a result (vol.1 p.213-4). Mrs Fermor firmly believes that he was

'so warmly attached to pleasure, that nothing, I imagine, but an intire [sic] incapacity of enjoying it could have induced him to take a wife, who was

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<sup>44</sup> Henry Mackenzie, *The Man of Feeling* (New York: Norton, 1958).

<sup>45</sup> Elizabeth Eger and Lucy Peltz, 'Introduction', in *Brilliant Women: eighteenth-century Bluestockings*, ed. by Elizabeth Eger and Lucy Peltz (London: National Portrait Gallery Publications, 2008), p.14.

<sup>46</sup> Elizabeth Eger, 'The Bluestocking Circle: Friendship, Patronage and Learning', in *Brilliant Women*, p.21.

<sup>47</sup> Elizabeth Eger, 'General Introduction', in *Bluestocking Feminism: writings of the Bluestocking Circle, 1738-1785 Volume 1 Elizabeth Montague*, volume ed. Elizabeth Eger, general ed. Gary Kelly (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1999), p.xxxi.

young and perfectly innocent, [...] in the character of a mistress [...] or as a nurse' (vol.1 p.213).

This is the complete opposite to the 'ideal of rational domesticity' which 'affected the motives and actions of the bluestockings'<sup>48</sup>. Styles of courtship began to change in the eighteenth century as friendship, along with mutual admiration, began to be seen as the foundations of a lasting marriage<sup>49</sup>. This attitude is promoted by *The Rational Lovers* which offers a template for married bliss. Sir Charles is 'conquered by reason, not by passion' (vol.2 p.210), and 'their mutual affection, as it was entirely founded on reason, was not diminished by time: it increased every hour, and, while they lived together, was never interrupted' (vol.2 p.214). *The Rational Lovers* can be read as advice literature for marriage in the guise of a trashy novel and includes many examples of 'irrational' relationships, summarised in appendix C.

The influential bluestocking Elizabeth Montagu was also a shrewd manager of her husband's coal mines, which allowed her to be both a literary patron and charitably active<sup>50</sup>. This is supported by the textual evidence in *The Rational Lovers*, as Sir Charles asks Mrs Fermor "'shall you not, as you have, as I know, a taste for literature, be glad, when you have time, to peruse these volumes?'" (vol.1 p.91). However, not only does he defer to Mrs Fermor on matters of literary taste but also asks her 'opinion and advice about the regulation of his family and estate' (vol. 1 p.117) which was 'greatly improved' (vol. 1 p.118) by her suggestions. In his essay 'Of Essay Writing', the philosopher David Hume writes that 'all men of sense [...] have a

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<sup>48</sup> Sylvia Harcstark Myers, *The Bluestocking Circle: women, friendship, and the life of the mind in eighteenth-century England* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990), p.85.

<sup>49</sup> Sylvia Harcstark Myers, p.86.

<sup>50</sup> Elizabeth Eger, 'General Introduction', p.lxii-lxiii.

great deference for their [women's] judgement of such books as lie within the compass of their knowledge'<sup>51</sup>.

*The Rational Lovers* also tackles another important social issue for women in the eighteenth century, independence and marriage. Until the Married Women's Property Act of 1882, on marriage the property of the wife became that of her husband, and any personal property acquired during that marriage also went to the husband. In contrast, women who never married, or became widowed, maintained ownership and control over their property. Elizabeth Carter, an influential member of the Bluestocking Circle, consciously chose not to marry as she valued her independence<sup>52</sup>. These are the same values which make Mrs Fermor reluctant to marry Sir Charles and at the start of the novel she declares that she has 'no thoughts of marrying again' (vol.1 p.124). Sir Charles even recognises her concerns and attempts to alleviate them-

'You shall reign sole mistress of me and mine: you shall be the uncontrolled disposer of your company and your time: a large sum shall immediately be settled on you, by which you will be rendered completely independent' (vol.2 p.3)

When she finally agrees to marry him Sir Charles keeps his promise (vol.2 p.202).

What links Mrs Fermor then with the women of the Bluestocking Circle is the fact that they were predominantly single, widowed or distant in their marriage and had some control over how they lived and used their time<sup>53</sup>. In this sense *The Rational Lovers* goes beyond Richardson's *Pamela*, as Mrs Fermor resists marriage

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<sup>51</sup> David Hume, 'On Essay Writing', in Elizabeth Eger, 'General Introduction', in *Bluestocking Feminism: Writings of the Bluestocking Circle 1738- 1785 Volume 1 Elizabeth Montague*, volume ed. Elizabeth Eger, general ed. Gary Kelly (London: Pickering & Chatton, 1999), p.xxviii.

<sup>52</sup> Sylvia Harcstark Myers, p.111.

<sup>53</sup> Sylvia Harcstark Myers, p.120.

not simply to preserve her virtue, but to assert her independence and the equality of her relationships with both men and women.

### ***Hester Chapone***

There are striking similarities between the ideas presented by the character of Mrs Fermor and Hester Chapone's *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind addressed to a young lady*, published in 1773. Originally a series of letters written to her niece, it was 'an immediate enormous success'<sup>54</sup>. Unlike other advice literature of the period, which focussed on creating obedient women lacking intellectual curiosity, Chapone's letters advocated the intellectual and moral capacities of women<sup>55</sup>. In common with other bluestockings, and the author of *The Rational Lovers*, Chapone believed that marriage 'is the highest state of friendship', and that 'those matches are the happiest which are made on rational grounds'<sup>56</sup>. Chapone, like Mrs Fermor, likes her "'present way of life extremely well; too well to change it'" (vol.1 p.130), believing that the single woman 'must be honoured by all persons of virtue, for preferring the single state to a union unworthy of her'<sup>57</sup>.

Chapone warns her niece of the dangers of vanity, critiquing young women 'ambitious of nothing more than to be admired for their persons, their dress, or their most trivial accomplishments'<sup>58</sup>, and Miss Bloom would surely be amongst their number, as she is 'never so well pleased, as when she was seen and admired' (vol.1

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<sup>54</sup> Rhoda Zut, 'Letters on the Improvement of the Mind: Introductory Note', in *Bluestocking Feminism: Writings of the Bluestocking Circle 1738-1786 Volume 3 Catherine Talbot & Hester Chapone*, volume ed. Rhoda Zuk, general ed. Gary Kelly (London: Pickering & Chatton, 1999), pp. 257-259 (257).

<sup>55</sup> Rhoda Zut, 'Letters on the Improvement of the Mind: Introductory Note', p.258.

<sup>56</sup> Hester Chapone, 'Letters on the Improvement of the Mind', in *Bluestocking Feminism: Writings of the Bluestocking Circle 1738-1786 Volume 3 Catherine Talbot & Hester Chapone*, volume ed. Rhoda Zuk, general ed. Gary Kelly (London: Pickering & Chatton, 1999), pp.261-356 (303-4).

<sup>57</sup> Hester Chapone, p.305.

<sup>58</sup> Hester Chapone, p.286.

p.15). When rejected by Sir Charles, Miss Bloom comforts herself by admiring her beauty in the mirror (vol.1 p.66). The author condemns Miss Bloom's behaviour (see appendix C). Chapone also warns of the dangers of flattery and 'excessive and ill-judged indulgence from a husband'<sup>59</sup>, which resonates with Mrs Fermor's warning to Sir Charles that 'never should you encrease [sic] the vanity, pride or self-conceit of any woman' (vol.1 p.73). It is also important for Chapone that her niece seeks 'some person of riper years and judgement'<sup>60</sup> who can give her honest advice, and this is the role Mrs Fermor plays for Miss Bloom at the start of the narrative. She advises her 'with the sincerest intention' on her relationship with Sir Charles and, like Chapone, writes her a letter, prevailing on her to rethink her inappropriate behaviour (vol.1 p.24).

The number of similarities between *Letter on the Improvement of the Mind* and *The Rational Lovers* is indeed striking, especially when it is taken into account that *Letters* was published four years after *The Rational Lovers*, so the latter could not be a direct imitation. What this does suggest is that both are writing from an existing pool of ideas present in eighteenth-century society and culture. It also emphasises the fact that although *The Rational Lovers* would not have been considered of high literary value, it is valuable in its atypicality and in what it can tell us about social and commercial discourses of the period.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, although *The Rational Lovers* has been neglected by scholars in the past, with only the paratext being examined in its relation to the Nobles' feud

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<sup>59</sup> Hester Chapone, p.313.

<sup>60</sup> Hester Chapone, p.292.

with Robert Baldwin, it does inhabit an unusual position in the eighteenth-century literary market, and in the history of the development of the novel. It encompasses several important discourses spanning both 'low' and 'high' culture, the perceived decline brought about by circulating libraries, and the Bluestocking Circle.

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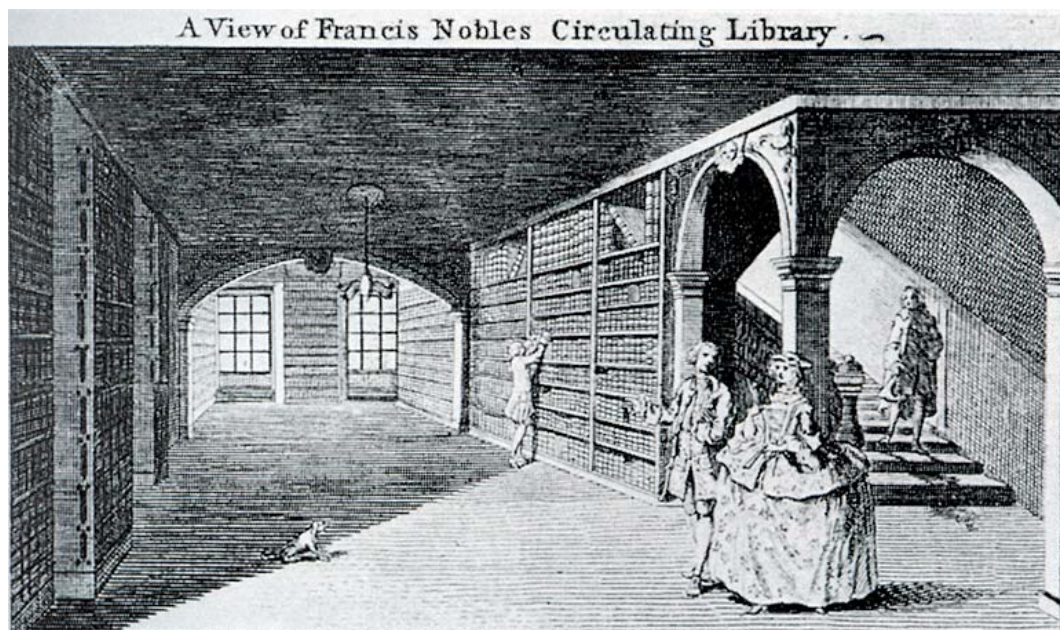
**Appendix A**

**Bibliographical Description**

<p><b>Author</b> (and attribution as it appears on title page, or note of pseudonym or anonymity)</p>	<p>Anonymous</p>
<p><b>Title</b> (as it appears on title page)</p>	<p>The Rational Lovers: or, the history of Sir Charles Leusum and Mrs Frances Fermor.</p>
<p><b>Imprint</b> (Place of publication: publisher, year of publication as they appear on title page)</p>	<p>London: Printed for Francis Noble, at his Circulating Library, near Middle Row, Holborn; and John Noble, at his Circulating Library, St. Martin's Court, Leicester Square. MDCCLXIX. (1969)</p>
<p><b>Physical description</b> (details relating to all copies, e.g. number of volumes, number of pages, size, price – sometimes shown on title page, quality of the paper and printing, illustrations, etc.)</p>	<p>Two volumes, volume one 234 pp., volume two 214pp., 12o. [duodecimo]. Good quality paper and printing, straight on the page, although some pages a bit faint and others double printed. Pencil note on both title pages: 'C. Howe', and in volume one: 'Anonymous First Edition'. Printer's ornaments on both title pages.</p>
<p><b>Physical description</b> (details relating only to this specific copy, e.g. binding &amp; decoration, binding anomalies, annotations etc.)</p>	<p>Vellum board binding, unusual for this period, with title of novel on the spine. Library reference? Carved into cover of volume one (10457?) Marbled decoration inside front and back covers or both volumes.</p>
<p><b>Provenance</b> (e.g. bookplates, inscriptions)</p>	<p>None.</p>

<p><b>Details of advertisements</b> (you can summarise if there is a long list e.g. genre, price range, a few characteristic or notable titles)</p>	<p>'Advertisement to the Public', dated 14<sup>th</sup> January 1969, and 'Rejoinder', dated 2<sup>nd</sup> February 1969, both defending their businesses against the accusations of the <i>London Magazine</i>. Does not include 3 leaves of 'Books Printed for F. and J. Noble' in the back of the second volume as described in the English Short Title Catalogue, and included in the copy on Eighteenth Century Collections Online.</p>
<p><b>Paratext</b> (title page epigraph, dedication, preface, introduction, etc. noted or summarised)</p>	<p>Quotation from Pope at the start of the 'Advertisement to the Public': 'Tis Hard to say, if greater want of skill/ Appear in writing or in judging ill;/ But of the two less dang'rous is th' offence/ To tire of patience than mislead our sense:/ Some few in that, but numbers err in this,/ Ten censure wrong for one who writes amiss./ POPE.' This is taken from Part 1 of Alexander Pope's 'An Essay on Criticism', in which he notes the lack of taste in critics. The full text of this essay can be found at <a href="http://www.poetryfoundation.org/learning/poetics-essay.html?id=237826">http://www.poetryfoundation.org/learning/poetics-essay.html?id=237826</a></p>

**Appendix B**



AT  
*Francis Nobles's*  
Large Circulating Library,  
At  
*Otway's Head, in King Street, Covent Garden.*  
BOOKS are  
LENT to READ.  
*(Both English and French.)*  
At Half a Guinea a Year,  
OR  
Three Shillings a Quarter.  
*Note. New Books Bought as soon as Publish'd,*  
Ready Money for any Library or Parcel of Books, or Books Exchang'd.

<<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Nobles-library.png>> [accessed 14/12/2010]

### Appendix C

<b>Character</b>	<b>Relationship as an Example of a Bad Marriage</b>
<b>Miss Bloom</b>	<p>‘the man whom I intend to marry, merely to make my fortune’ (vol.1, p.19)</p> <p>‘became at length, by treachery, a sacrifice to a man of pleasure, who, when satiated, left her in distress’ (vol.2, p.212)</p>
<b>Miss Napper</b>	<p>‘married Mr Maynard, whom, from jealousy and avarice, locked her up, and rendered her life completely miserable’ (vol.2, p.212)</p>
<b>Lucy</b>	<p>“‘ The villain infused a stupefying drug into the negus I drank, after which I could give no account of what passed; but when I waked, found myself in bed with him at bagnio.”’ (vol.2, p.34)</p> <p>‘fell an early martyr to the follies of her youth, and to the consequences of an ill-placed passion’ (vol.2, p.212-3)</p>
<b>‘Poor woman’</b>	<p>Married her husband against both family’s consent, her husband was cut off by his father, and having no practical skills to support his family they lived in poverty (vol.1, p.49-50)</p>
<b>Mrs Loyd</b>	<p>‘who had been reduced the necessity of going out into the world, by the extravagance of a worthless husband, by whom she was left in a distressful condition’ (vol.1, p.101)</p>
<b>Miss Hill</b>	<p>‘too fond of <i>rank</i>’ (vol.1, p.155), ends up unhappy and alone.</p>
<b>Mr Maynard</b>	<p>“‘his sister is now pining away her life, merely because he would not part with her fortune (when she might have married advantageously)”’ (vol.1, p.193)</p> <p>“‘ locks them up and makes them live upon a mere trifle”’ (vol.1, p.195)</p>