

Introduction to *The Daughter: or the history of Miss Emilia Royston, and Miss Harriet Ayres; in a series of letters*

Maria Susanna Cooper remains one of the more elusive female writers from the eighteenth century, and we are left to infer a large amount of information from limited evidence to discover how her work might have fitted into the contemporary novel marketplace and society. It has been thought that the eighteenth-century authors we are unfamiliar with should be explored further. April Alliston wants to challenge ‘the received assumption...that these novels simply constitute the ‘unreadable’ margin of ‘flawed’ attempts that centres, as its historical origin, the recognized tradition of the novel.’<sup>1</sup>

What is undeniable about this author however is that she succeeded in writing and publishing resolutely didactic novels. Her eldest son Bransby Cooper, who continued to edit some of her work after her death, claimed that Cooper’s literary work was undoubtedly linked to her role as a mother; ‘the entertainment and instruction of her children, (and) a sense of duty...were (her) principle motives.’<sup>2</sup>

Cooper was born in 1737 and was the eldest daughter of James Bransby and Anna Maria Paston, and she married Revd. Samuel Cooper in 1761. What is remarkable about Cooper is she published work fairly consistently through her lifetime, despite the tragedies she suffered in the deaths of six of her ten children. She had had one child (Bransby) when

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<sup>1</sup> April Alliston, *Virtue’s faults: Correspondence in Eighteenth-Century British and French Women’s Fiction*, (California: Stanford University press, 1996) p.1

<sup>2</sup> Jeanne Wood, ‘Cooper, Maria Susanna (1737–1807)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/47163>, accessed 7 Jan 2009]

she published her first novel, *Letters Between Emilia and Harriet* in 1762; and by the time she published her best known work *The Exemplary Mother: or, Letters Between Mrs. Villars and her Family* in 1769, she had six children. This suggests truth behind Bransby's comment that motherhood and writing were connected for Cooper: arguably with so many children the two could hardly be separate, although difficult to manage on a practical basis. She went on to publish this novel – *The Daughter; or, The History of Miss Emilia Royston and Miss Harriet Ayres* in a series of letters, which was actually a revision of *Letters Between Emilia and Harriet*, and *The History of Fanny Meadows* in 1775; and *Jane Shore to Her Friend* in 1776. After her death in 1807, Bransby organised the publication of *Moral Tales* in 1811 and *The Wife, or, Caroline Herbert* in 1813, as well as new editions of her previous novels.<sup>3</sup>

In terms of literature, she was well known for her epistolary novels which Bransby described as 'exemplify(ing) the female character in the several stations in life.'<sup>4</sup> As the title suggests, having already written her idea of *The Exemplary Mother* in 1769, with this novel she chose to exemplify *The Daughter*.

A stark contrast in letters (and by extension characters) between Emilia Royston and Harriet Ayres is blatant at the beginning of the novel. The contrast between town and country forms an apt representation of the different dispositions of the correspondents. Residing in the country, Emilia is the voice of virtue, affirming the importance of faith, duty and sensibility in life, while Harriet, courting numerous lovers and enjoying the

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<sup>3</sup> Jeanne Wood, 'Cooper, Maria Susanna (1737–1807)'

<sup>4</sup> Jeanne Wood, 'Cooper, Maria Susanna (1737–1807)'

social activities London has to offer, appears to be a personification of moderate vice. Harriet's letters complain of the boring sensibility of Mr. Lovewell, and claim she would only consider marrying exciting Sir George Townly. Emilia warns her off Sir George and implores her to see the value of marrying Lovewell, sentiments which are echoed by Harriet's mother, not to mention by Cooper in her choice of character names.

Emilia herself then confesses to having feelings for the virtuous James Sydney, but her parents do not approve. Harriet quarrels with Lovewell, only for Harriet to banish Sir George when her maid confesses he once raped and abandoned her. Emilia accepts a proposal from a Lord Melworth because her parents approve, but he loses his fortune. Sydney communicates his plan to go abroad to make himself wealthy enough to propose to Emilia, and leaves before her father can tell him it's unnecessary. Lovewell rescues Harriet from Sir George and she marries him. Sydney's brother arrives with news of his brother's death and proposes to Emilia himself, who refuses him. James Sydney turns up alive proving his 'brother' an impostor and marries Emilia, and the Lovewells move to the country.

It is clear that Cooper's Emilia is an example of the ideal, dutiful daughter, and that Harriet goes on a journey throughout the novel and succeeds in becoming a near version of this too. This depiction in the text is not subtle, nor is it meant to be, since Cooper wanted to instruct others on how to behave and how not to behave following the examples of these characters. However, on reading the original edition this intention is even more blatant, as it would have been to an eighteenth-century reader, in the Preface.

Here, Cooper comments on the fact that *The Daughter* is a revision of *Letters Between Emilia and Harriet*, but claims she was originally too young to write the contrasting girls adequately, and that the ‘story was too simple and followed too far the usual track of novels, to conduct the reader to the temples of truth’ and that ‘the faults most common in this species of writing, and most pernicious to youthful minds, is the romantic indulgence of love, to the destruction of the earliest duty of life.’<sup>5</sup>

Cooper’s criticism of the effect of Romantic novels on young readers implies the extent to which she believes her own work may influence people, and the preface suggests how, for this reason, she had to revise the novel and portray the heroine as having no faults whatsoever. She claims that in *Letters*, ‘Emilia’s heart was devoted to an object worthy of its attachment, but she engaged herself in a promise which abridged the rights of parental authority. This defect in example lessened the influence of the precepts. The writer has now endeavoured to draw a perfect pattern of filial obedience and female delicacy...she has attempted to interest the affections, to modulate the passions, and to mend the heart.’<sup>6</sup> This draws an unwavering and obvious connection between the text and the paratext and tells the reader exactly how the novel and heroine should be viewed – Emilia’s behaviour is not a matter of opinion for the readers – they have already been unequivocally told that Emilia is a ‘perfect pattern of filial obedience.’

Cooper’s intention to write instructively rather than entertainingly is supported by evidence found in other primary material. Her most famous novel, in which she portrayed

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<sup>5</sup> Maria Susanna Cooper, *The Daughter: or the history of Miss Emilia Royston, and Miss Harriet Ayres; in a series of letters*, (London: J. Dodsley, 1775), p. vi

<sup>6</sup> *The Daughter*, p.6

*The Exemplary Mother*, states similar intentions in the ‘Advertisement to the Reader.’ Cooper claims that ‘If, in an age when the most unnatural characters and the most improbable adventures are continually circulated and eagerly sought after, the following work (containing the Exhibition of a genuine character in the common occurrences of *real life*) can engage attention.’<sup>7</sup> This echoes Frances Burney’s sentiments in the *Evelina* preface in which she wishes to ‘prepare for disappointment those who, in the perusal of these sheets, entertain the gentle expectation of being transported to the fantastic regions of Romance.’<sup>8</sup>

An apt example of Cooper’s instruction on how to be the perfect daughter in the text is when Emilia agrees to marry Lord Melworth regardless for her feelings for Sydney, simply because her parents approve. She writes to Harriet that although she thinks often of Sydney, she has ‘now an opportunity of proving (her) gratitude and obedience to the best of parents, by a sacrifice of inclinations, which (she) ought not to indulge in opposition to their designs, or without their concurrence.’<sup>9</sup>

At this point, it seems as though Cooper is being completely consistent with the aims she set out in the preface; Emilia is putting her own feelings aside to serve her parents under the heading ‘filial duty’ as Cooper obviously thinks she should. However, Cooper’s writing soon becomes more ambiguous. Although Emilia agrees to her parents’ choice of Melworth, she is in fact saved from actually having to marry him by a series of fortunate

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<sup>7</sup> Maria Susanna Cooper, *The Exemplary Mother: or, letters between Mrs. Villars and her family*, (London: printed for T. Becket and P.A. De Hondt, 1769), p.2

<sup>8</sup> Frances Burney, *Evelina*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) p.10

<sup>9</sup> *The Daughter*, p.135

incidences; Melworth turns out to have gambled away his fortune, only for Sydney to return alive with enough of a fortune to marry Emilia.

Surely this ending is slightly suspect for a writer who rejected 'romantic indulgence' in her preface and promised to guide readers to the 'temples of truth?' In the kind of 'real life' scenarios Cooper sought to illustrate in *The Exemplary Mother*, it is unlikely that someone in Emilia's position would end up marrying the man she actually wanted to as opposed to the one approved by her parents.

Did Cooper, then, compromise her didactic, realistic angle to ensure people in the eighteenth century would actually want to turn the pages? Did Cooper feel that the contemporary reception of her novel would be more positive with this ending? Perhaps many eighteenth century readers were fine with reading novels that involved the heroine learning life's lessons, as long as the ending didn't involve them having to live with the consequences of such lessons.

Exclusive of conjecture, the reception of *The Daughter* in the eighteenth-century is difficult to gauge because of a significant lack of reviews. Having said this, the original edition of the novel provides some evidence. The dedication is to 'Lady Beauchamp Proctor', signifying that Cooper considered herself high enough up the social hierarchy as the wife of a reverend to have an 'ambition to be admitted to a share of (her) friendship.' It seems unlikely Cooper would have dedicated her novel to such a 'Lady' in an attempt to gain her friendship unless she was fairly sure it would be well received. Her positive

expectations may have been based on the reception of *Letters Between Emilia and Harriet*, which she comments on in *The Daughter* preface - how 'the general approbation it met with far exceeded not only the expectation of the authoress, but also, as she was inclined to think, the merits of the work.'<sup>10</sup>

There is further suggestion of a positive reception of the novel in the original edition, if we look at the inscription on the second page; 'Catherine Judith Fountayne The Gift of New Grandmother in the year 1776.'<sup>11</sup> There is no available information on this person, but it is perhaps sufficient to know that the novel was valued enough to be given as a gift between a grandmother and a new grandchild only a year after it was published.

The publishers of her novels also provide some evidence as to the reception. The title page of *Letters Between Emilia and Harriet* shows that it was 'printed for R. and J. Dodsley in Pall Mall.' The Dodsley brothers' bookshop in London was a well-known, successful business. Robert Dodsley had a literary network to exploit whenever he wanted to publish new work, 'Dodsley published most of the major authors of the eighteenth-century: Burke, Gray, Johnson, Sterne, Pope, Smollet, Swift and Young. In addition he was acquainted with many 'eminent' people of the period...Fielding, Richardson.'<sup>12</sup> *The Daughter* was also published by J. Dodsley thirteen years later, and given the successful names the Dodsley's were associated with, *Letters Between Emilia and Harriet* must have been received well enough for James Dodsley to see potential

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<sup>10</sup> *The Daughter*, p.v

<sup>11</sup> *The Daughter*, Inscription

<sup>12</sup> Ingrid Tiekens-Boon van Ostade and Randy Bax, 'Of Dodsley's projects and linguistic influence: The language of Johnson and Lowth', (*University of Leiden*, April 2002), [http://www.let.leidenuniv.nl/hsl\\_shl/johnson%20lowth.htm](http://www.let.leidenuniv.nl/hsl_shl/johnson%20lowth.htm), para 2 of 13

value in a revised version of the novel in *The Daughter*. There is also the fact that after *The Exemplary Mother* was published in 1769, it was published again in 1784 by the same publishers as the first edition, and Cooper comments on ‘the favourable judgement the world has already passed upon’<sup>13</sup> the novel in her dedication.

The expansion of the market for novels in itself might argue that the year in which *The Daughter* was published was a good time for the majority of novels to be well received. The figures of book sales between 1725 to 1770 rose considerably, and by the 1790s (after a decline during the 1770s) ‘the publication of new book titles was running at four times the level of the beginning of the century.’<sup>14</sup> At the very least, Dodsley must have been confident in the market for didactic novels.

This last argument is a fairly sound one, since the foundation for the popularity of instruction in books was established in the first half of the seventeenth-century when people like Elizabeth Grymeston, Dorothy Leigh and Elizabeth Joscelyn added to the collection of conduct books work on ‘maternal advice written by women who found in the newly acknowledged responsibilities of motherhood a potential for personal fulfilment.’<sup>15</sup> Even a century later, it seems people did not dislike guidance in virtuous living. Whereas *The Exemplary Mother* may echo certain values or sentiments found in ‘maternal advice’ books, *The Daughter* shows that, according to Cooper, the door swings

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<sup>13</sup> Maria Susanna Cooper, *The Exemplary Mother: or, letters between Mrs. Villars and her family* (London : printed for T. Becket, 1784.) p. iii

<sup>14</sup> Cheryl Turner, *Living by the pen, Women writers in the eighteenth century*, (London: Routledge, 1992), p.84

<sup>15</sup> Raymond A. Anselment, *Katherine Paston and Brilliana Harley: Maternal Letters and the Genre of Mother's Advice*, (University of Connecticut, The University of North Carolina Press, 2004), p.431

both ways, and she is offering ‘Daughter advice.’ Cooper illustrates the virtue of a daughter bringing her parents joy with Emilia; ‘at this moment the thought of contributing to my parents’ happiness imparts to me the most delightful sensations. A satisfaction more refined than can result from any selfish gratification!’<sup>16</sup>

Another example of a female author concentrating on the influence of the mother in shaping the ideal daughter is Marie Madeline de Lafayette, who wrote *The Princess de Cleves*, whose transformation into a more virtuous character is inspired by the ‘maternal imperative that she live up to her own portrait moral, the picture of herself as an ideal woman, as painted for her by her mother.’<sup>17</sup>

Cooper’s didactic aims mean she would probably consider her work to have a positive impact on society – her novel is not to merely entertain readers, but to shape their attitudes. In fact, Bransby’s comment about his mother writing ideal examples of women ‘at several stations in life’ suggests that Cooper had the idea that she could guide a female reader through her life, from childhood to motherhood. From this perspective it is more understandable that Cooper wanted to depict Emilia as completely devoid of faults, and also why she portrayed Harriet as journeying from one extreme to the other. In her first letter, Harriet claims she wouldn’t wish to live in the country with ‘no masquerades, no routs, no operas, no Cornley’s, no Pantheon, no delightful amusements to partake!’<sup>18</sup>, and that she has ‘no intention of ever marrying.’<sup>19</sup> Yet, in her last letter to her mother from

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<sup>16</sup> *The Daughter*, p.136

<sup>17</sup> April Alliston, p.33

<sup>18</sup> *The Daughter*, p.2

<sup>19</sup> *The Daughter*, p.3

the quiet country she affirms she is ‘happy in (her) own reflections, and taste(s) the fruits of love and friendship, which can flourish only on the stem of virtue.’<sup>20</sup> Harriet’s transformation demonstrates to her readers that it is possible make such a journey. This way, like other morally driven writers, Cooper allows her social conscience to be seen through her writing in professing that the younger generation need to respect and be guided by their parents. The bookplate in the original edition is certainly a testament to the owner’s belief in the virtuous instruction found in *The Daughter*, as it reads ‘Les Livres Sont Des Amis Qui Ne Se Trompent Pas’<sup>21</sup> which translates as ‘books are friends who do not make mistakes.’ This is undoubtedly the kind of receptive attitude of the novel Cooper would approve of.

The issue of her short-lived anonymity also hints at a degree of success (and therefore positive reception). The first edition of *The Exemplary Mother* was published anonymously with the following on the title page: ‘Published by a LADY from the originals in her possession.’<sup>22</sup> The highlighting of ‘lady’ obviously reflects the idea that it was more acceptable to be a female author if you were a female author of a certain standing. It is not terribly curious that she didn’t name the work as hers, as anonymity was a fairly common practice in the eighteenth century and had a variety of different motives; it may even be that the publishers suggested she should not put her name to it. ‘Alexander Pope acted as his own publisher on many occasions and generally manipulating the mechanics of publication to serve his literary ends...both these

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<sup>20</sup> *The Daughter*, p.279

<sup>21</sup> Maria Susanna Cooper, *The Daughter: or the history of Miss Emilia Royston, and Miss Harriet Ayres; in a series of letters*, (London: J. Dodsley, 1775), bookplate

<sup>22</sup> *The Exemplary Mother* (1769), title page

circumstances meant that Pope would be more alert than most to the contents of the title page, and specifically to the presence or nature of an authorial signature.<sup>23</sup> It might be that Cooper had less of a say when it came to her publishers – or she may have been nervous about the reception of what was only her second novel (her first had also been published anonymously). With *The Daughter*, it seems she was less concerned about anonymity because she signed her name at the end of her dedication, which suggests she did not fear bad reviews. Her name still didn't feature on the title page but instead appears 'by the authoress of *The Exemplary Mother*<sup>24</sup>', which shows she desired the novel to be associated with her previous work. She also signs the dedication of *The Exemplary Mother* when it was published again in 1784.

Cooper's message to society of the importance of 'filial obedience' in the novel is heavily linked to religious duty, which might have been received as fairly normal in the eighteenth century, in which time the vast majority of people were Christian. Emilia's letters to Harriet speak volumes of Cooper's belief that the ideal daughter should be constantly aware of her responsibility to and faith in God. Emilia says, in regard to Harriet's maid who had been wronged by Sir George; 'I hope religion, to which I believe her unfeignedly devoted, will soon restore her mind to tranquillity.'<sup>25</sup>

Cooper is particularly enthusiastic about advising people to trust in their religion in life's difficult times, such as when Emilia's widowed friend, Mrs. Freeman, dies and Emilia comforts herself that 'virtue blooms amidst the decay of mortality, and the Christian

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<sup>23</sup> Pat Rogers, 'Nameless Names: Pope, Curll, and The Uses of Anonymity', p.736

<sup>24</sup> *The Daughter*, title page

<sup>25</sup> *The Daughter*, p.150

receives the crown of unfading felicity.’ It might be the religious angle that excuses Cooper from her idealistic ending which is arguably inconsistent with her didactic intentions. The reason being that while it could be considered that she let Emilia ‘off the hook’ when it came to marrying Melworth; it could also be argued that this was part of Cooper’s message to trust God’s guidance as well as that of parents. Although Emilia is desperately unhappy when it seems as though Sydney is dead, she claims that ‘Distrust is criminal. Resignation is the best armour in the Christian’s warfare.’<sup>26</sup> While finally getting to marry Sydney she says she is ‘influenced by the rules of Christianity,’ and has ‘learned never to be anxious for events’ as she is ‘convinced that these will be regulated by eternal wisdom and goodness.’<sup>27</sup>

Cooper’s tactics for convincing people of their religious duty is quite clever. As the readers turn the pages they will of course see Harriet’s transformation from vice to virtue, and they will also not have failed to notice Emilia’s letters containing reminders and affirmations of faith. It is likely therefore, that the readers should connect the two and associate religion with Harriet’s new virtuous disposition. Simultaneously, Cooper is setting the readers up to follow example and receive her written religious guidance in the form of her novel, in the same way Harriet successfully receives Emilia’s. Cooper would presumably have thought like Brilliana Harley, a mother whose recorded letters to her son illustrate her belief that ‘good books’ are in the words of a mother’s advice book, ‘the way to Christ.’<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> *The Daughter*, p.204

<sup>27</sup> *The Daughter*, p.263

<sup>28</sup> Raymond A. Anselment, p.445

Given that this novel contains messages that might, by many, have been well received in the eighteenth century, and given that in this case certain evidence suggests that it was fairly well received; the question arises as to why Cooper remains a comparatively obscure female author of the eighteenth-century? Since 'We are told of an escalation in the numbers of women writers at the end of the eighteenth century which is linked with the concurrent popularity of Romantic fiction,'<sup>29</sup> why don't we know more about Cooper? Especially considering *The Daughter's* 'happy' ending lends itself to the Romantic.

This question is also particularly relevant as it can scarcely be attributed to her sex, due to the fact that 'European women's presence in the literary marketplace dramatically increased, female authors produced a large number of strictly epistolary novels in which the primary fictional correspondences are exchanged between female characters, and in which the reader is inscribed, typically, as a young woman similar in age and situation to the heroine.'<sup>30</sup> Why then, in a market where epistolary novels written by female authors were popular, did Cooper's work fail to stand the test of time unlike women like Burney, or even later on, Austen?

Although this question can never be answered for certain, it seems possible that the fact that the novel is completely lacking in satire might go some way to explaining it. Moral guidance and religious instruction alone may have been to some extent successful in the eighteenth century when people, or at least the people who read such novels, would find

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<sup>29</sup> Cheryl Turner, p.7

<sup>30</sup> April Alliston, p.4

them life-affirming and useful, as well as entertaining. However, looking at nineteenth-century novels, it might be fair to say that nineteenth and twentieth-century readers received moral messages better when they were served with a dose of satire or comedy. The characters in *The Daughter* are defined by levels of virtue, they range from Sir George, a vicious, immoral libertine to Emilia the unwaveringly faithful and virtuous Christian correspondent. Cooper's book contains not even a hint of a satirical character or occurrence, probably because she deemed it irrelevant in such a didactic novel.

What Cooper did consider relevant however can be seen clearly in the text. Like other writers of epistolary novels, we can see with *The Daughter* a clear unity between authorial intention and literary form. In using the epistolary form, Cooper "allows the character to defend 'the female right to the use of the pen: 'writing (is)...a more rational employ than other pastimes and, furthermore, the men...will scarcely be afraid of women, because they are capable of being agreeable companions, and useful friends.'"<sup>31</sup> Cooper approves of women writing letters offering guidance, she approves of women (like her) writing didactic novels; and so in writing such a novel, she gives women license to do both. It is understandable that Cooper wished to re-characterize the novel considering the tone of the marketplace; 'the novel is characterized by 'its popularity as a form of entertainment and its inferiority as a form of art...(and) the emergence of female novelists is noted as a contributory factor in these regressive developments.'<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Jeanne Wood, 'Cooper, Maria Susanna (1737–1807)'

<sup>32</sup> Cheryl Turner, p.8

In the light of this, Cooper's text suggests she wants the novel to be thought of less as 'entertainment' and more, as she said in *The Exemplary Mother* preface, about addressing 'the common occurrences of real life,' on the assumption that this would give female authors – and therefore the novel – a better name. Although female authors often applauded the work of other published women, they did not all have the same goal in their writing and they could be disapproving and critical with regard to work of others.<sup>33</sup> Cooper is trying to guide people to write the same way she does. This can be seen in the text if we look at Harriet as the 'work in progress' daughter. After her transition to becoming a far more ideal character, she recognises Cooper's lesson that her 'place' is in the country as Lovewell's wife as opposed to gallivanting around London. In the same way, Cooper believes a female author's place is in writing didactic novels, not Romantic. At the end of the novel, after Harriet has 'grown' into a virtuous woman, she writes to her mother that she is 'eager to embrace' her 'with filial duty to shew' her 'the beauties of the country which' she 'once despised.'<sup>34</sup> Put simply, upon reading Emilia's letters, Harriet has begun to *write* exemplary letters herself; just as Cooper wishes female authors to read her novel and then write more didactic novels themselves. It is not surprising that Cooper, as a female writer concerned with morality, would try to remedy 'eighteenth-century reviewers' complaints that women writers were engrossing the trade in novels and debasing the new genre with hastily written performances.'<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Cheryl Turner, p.129

<sup>34</sup> *The Daughter*, p.280

<sup>35</sup> Jane, Spencer, "Women writers and the eighteenth-century novel." *The Cambridge Companion to the Eighteenth-Century Novel*. Ed. John Richetti. Cambridge University Press, 1996. Cambridge Collections Online. Cambridge University Press. 07 January 2009  
<[http://cco.cambridge.org/extract?id=ccol0521419085\\_CCOL0521419085A011](http://cco.cambridge.org/extract?id=ccol0521419085_CCOL0521419085A011)>

Despite Cooper's work still being unknown, there is a significant enough amount of evidence to suggest that she produced novels in keeping with the eighteenth century literary marketplace and society; in terms of the themes she explored, the presentation of its original form, and the fact that the novels were largely well received. Although the sentiments in *The Daughter* may be too didactic for the tastes of twenty first century readers, her writing and the context in which she wrote it means she offers an impressive insight into the literary world of the eighteenth century that should not be as forgotten in the future, as it has been in the past.



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