Becoming Gentlemen: 
Women Writers, Masculinity, and War, 1778-1818.

Submitted by Megan Woodworth, to the University of Exeter as a thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English, October 2008.

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Abstract

In *Letters to a Young Man* (1801) Jane West states that “no character is so difficult to invent or support as that of a gentleman” (74). The invention of that character, determining what qualities, qualifications, and behaviour befits a gentleman, preoccupied writers and thinkers throughout the eighteenth century. This thesis traces the evolution of the masculine ideals – chivalry, republican virtue, professional merit – that informed what it meant to be a gentleman. Because gentlemanliness had implications for citizenship and political rights, Defoe, Richardson, Rousseau, and the other men who sought to define gentlemanliness increasingly connected it and citizenship to gendered virtue rather than socio-economic status. Women writers were equally concerned with the developing gentlemanly ideal and, as I will show, its political implications. This thesis brings together masculinity studies and feminist literary history, but also combines the gendered social history that often frames studies of women’s writing with the political and military history traditionally associated with men. Doody (1988) suggests that novels are influenced by three separate histories: “the life of the individual, the cultural life of the surrounding society, and the tradition of the chosen art.” With the feminocentric novel, however, the historical context is often circumscribed by a concern for what is ‘feminine’ and what polite lady novelists might be responding to. With the exception of women’s participation in the 1790s debates, eighteenth-century women writers have been seen as shying away from divisive political topics, including war. However, I will show that masculinity is central to re-evaluating the ways in which women writers engaged with politics through the courtship plot, because, as McCormack (2005) stresses, “politics and the family were inseparable in Georgian England.” Furthermore, as Russell (1995) observes, war is a cultural event that affects and alters “the textures of thought, feeling, and behaviour.”

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wars, this thesis will explore how political and military events influenced masculine ideals – particularly independence – and how these changes were negotiated in women’s novels.

Beginning with Frances Burney, this thesis explores the ways in which women writers offered solutions to the problem of masculinity while promoting a (proto)feminist project of equality. By rejecting chivalry and creating a model of manliness that builds on republican virtue and adopts the emerging professional ethic, women writers created heroes defined by personal merit, not accidents of birth. Burney begins this process in *Evelina* (1778) before problematising the lack of manly independence in *Cecilia* (1782). Charlotte Smith and Jane West take the problems Burney’s work exposes and offer alternatives to chivalric masculinity amidst the heightened concerns about liberty and citizenship surrounding the French revolution. Finally, Maria Edgeworth’s and Jane Austen’s Napoleonic-era novels promote professionalism as a path to gentility but also as a meritocratic alternative to landed and aristocratic social models. Though the solutions offered by these writers differ, in their opposition to chivalric masculinity they demonstrate that liberating men from the shackles of feudal dependence is essential to freeing women from patriarchal tyranny.
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