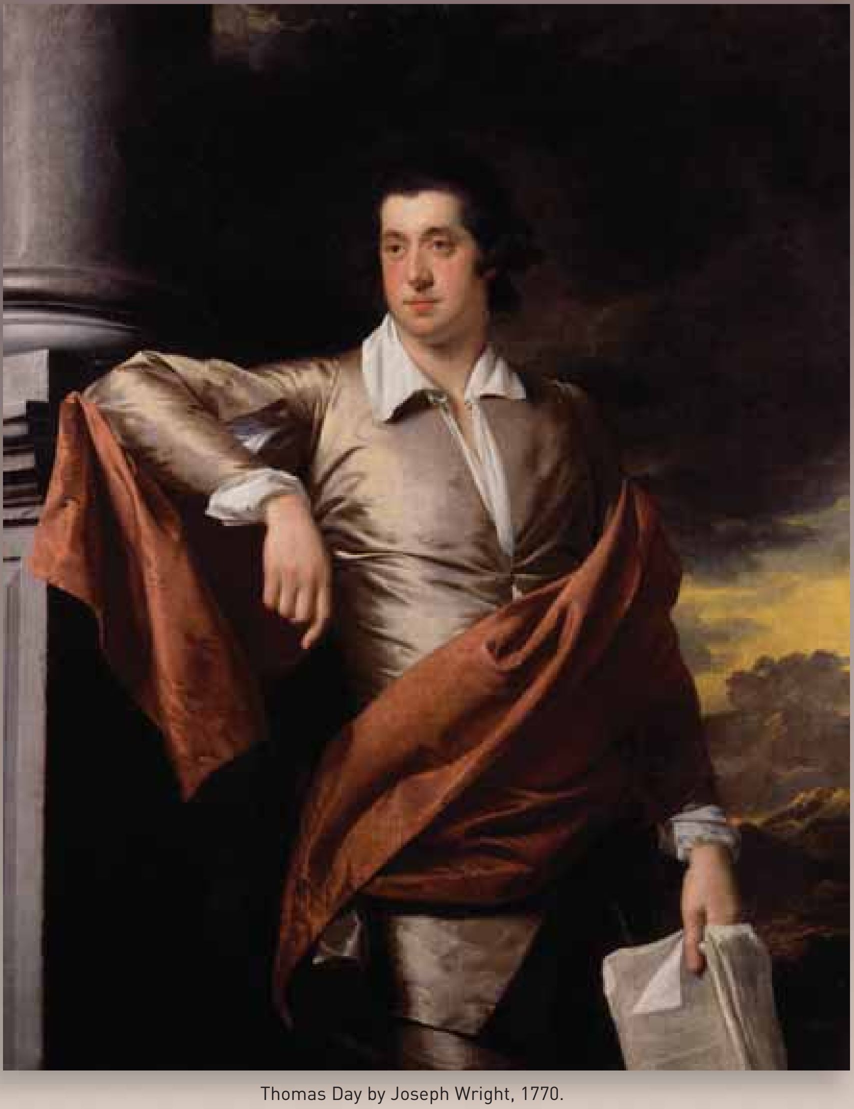
A PHILOSOPHICAL ROMANCE:

WOMEN, EDUCATION AND ENLIGHTENMENT

Kate Iles



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Thomas Day by Joseph Wright, 1770.

Thomas Day (1748-1789) was a member of the Lunar Society, but he was less mechanically or scientifically inclined than his colleagues. Influenced by the ideas of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), he embarked on the most unusual experiment of all the Lunar men, not in the realms of science and technology, but to acquire and educate a young girl to become his wife.

The Male/Female Divide

'The whole of education of women,' wrote the Genevan philosopher, Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his 1762 educational treatise, *Émile*, 'ought to relate to men.' The anatomical and physiological medical discoveries of the Enlightenment revealed that men and women were formed differently. Female skeletons were smaller and specifically designed to bear children, their nervous systems were different and their brains were smaller, which seemed to prove women's naturally ordained role as wife and mother. However, Rousseau elevated this domestic role and attributed to it a new importance; women might be destined for the home, but their role within it was vitally important as companions to their husbands and educators of their children. In *Émile*, Rousseau outlined a new system of child-rearing that allowed children to learn from experience, away from fashionable society. For girls, because nature had ordained them as companions for men, this education restricted them to the home and learning of their conjugal and maternal duties.

A Man in Possession of a Good Fortune and in Want of a Wife

Thomas Day was a serious-minded, philosophical young man, who exhibited a distaste for fashionable society at an early age. He was taken by the theories of Rousseau after reading *Émile*. In 1769, at the age of twenty-one and in possession of his inheritance, he came to the conclusion it was his 'duty to marry'.

Day wanted a wife of plain tastes, dismissive of fashion and luxury, sensible and frugal. She would accept that her role lay in the domestic sphere and had no pretensions outside it, restricting her influence to her home and family. However, securing such a wife proved problematic. Not only were his ideas not entirely congenial to the women he approached, but his disregard for fashion and dress had implications for his physical appearance. His best friend, Richard Lovell Edgeworth (1744-1817), who introduced him to the Lunar Society, explained, 'Mr Day's exterior was not at that time, prepossessing, he seldom combed his raven locks though he was remarkably fond of washing in the stream'.

Day grew despondent. Instead of questioning his own philosophical attitude towards marriage, or even personal hygiene, he decided the problem lay with the objects of his affections and the education they received, which made them too eager for the trappings of fashionable society and averse to the honest labour of housewife and mother.

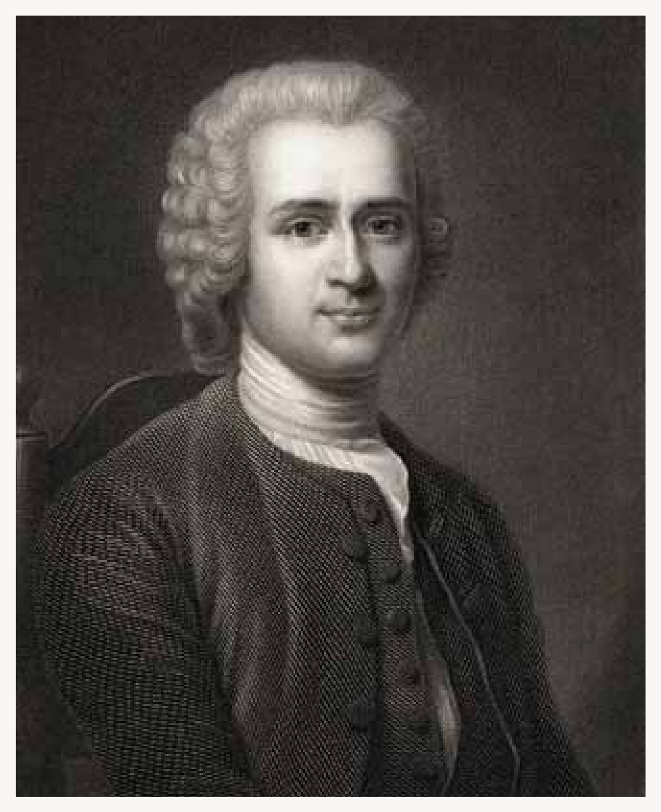
Day's 'Romantic' Experiment

'[H]e determined to put in practice a scheme, which had long occupied his imagination. This was no common project, but a design more romantic than any which we find in novels,' said Richard Lovell Edgeworth of the scheme that his friend devised to remedy his marital dilemma.

Anna Seward, the sharp-witted poet of Lichfield, associated with the Lunar circle through her friendships with Erasmus Darwin, Edgeworth and Day, explained rather more drily:

> *He resolved, if possible, that his wife should have a taste for literature and science, for moral and patriotic philosophy... He resolved also, that she should be as simple as a mountain girl in her dress, her diet and her manners; fearless and intrepid as the Spartan wives and Roman heroines - There was no finding such a creature ready-made; philosophical romance could not hope it. He must mould some infant into the being his fancy had imagined.*

Day decided to educate himself a wife. As absurd as this might sound, it was a perfect piece of Enlightenment logic. Day took a rational approach to marriage and saw it as the building block of society, which was to be taken seriously, and not merely as a refuge from licentiousness. Within marriage, Day wanted to apply the principles of Rousseau, with their demarcated roles for husbands and wives. Day dismissed the idea that women were innately feeble or delicate, choosing to assert they merely became that way through poor education and frivolous expectations.



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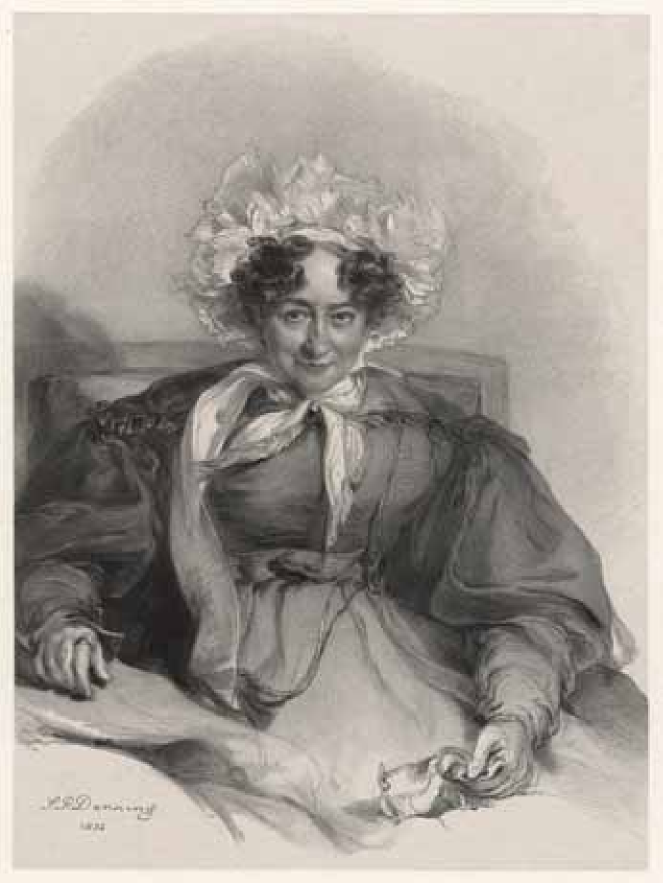
Jean-Jacques Rousseau from *The Gallery of Portraits*, 1833.



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Mrs Bicknell (formerly Sabrina Sidney) by Richard James Lane 1833; after Stephen Poyntz Denning, (1832).

Sabrina Sidney

Having resolved on his course of action, Day travelled, with his friend, John Bicknell, to Shrewsbury in Shropshire, to a branch of the Thomas Coram Foundling Hospital, where Day chose a twelve-year-old brunette, whom he named Sabrina Sidney. With the raw material for his experiment, Day's task began in earnest.

He relocated to Lichfield, where he had the benefit of the support of his Lunar friends. He began his training of Sabrina, which was said by Anna Seward to include the firing of blank pistol shots at her petticoats and dropping hot wax on her arms, to make her stoical and inure her to pain. But these are the more sensational aspects of Sabrina's education. She also received a 'robust and hardy education' aimed at making her the Spartan wife Day wanted. Day probably taught her to read the Classics, aspects of natural philosophy and geometry, took her out for muddy walks in the fresh air, regardless of rain or shine, and ensured she was 'brought up to understand every species of household employment'. Unfortunately, despite his every effort, Sabrina did not develop as Day wished, so she was sent off to a ladies boarding school in Sutton Coldfield.

Day eventually married Esther Milnes in 1778. He found in Esther a woman who admired his philosophical spirit and gladly renounced the society of others and her love of music for his sake. They enjoyed a happy, harmonious marriage until Day's accidental death falling from a horse in 1789.

Sabrina's life was subject to fluctuations of fortune. Left largely to her own devices, she supported herself by finding employment as a lady's companion until the man who accompanied Day to Shrewsbury, John Bicknell, reappeared in her life and asked her to marry him. Sabrina accepted and they moved to London where Sabrina gave birth to two sons, John Laurens and Henry Edgeworth. Bicknell died in 1787, after only three years of marriage. Sabrina found a position with the Reverend Charles Burney, brother of the novelist Fanny Burney, at his school in Greenwich. Here Sabrina lived for the rest of her life, working for Reverend Burney until the 1820s.

Courtesy Kate Iles

Shrewsbury School, formerly a branch of the Thomas Coram Foundling Hospital.

The Education of Women

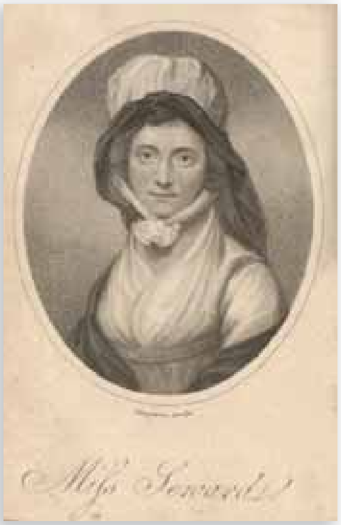
Although just one, rather extreme, example of an Enlightenment social experiment, Thomas Day's relationship with Sabrina Sidney highlights the ways in which Enlightenment thought changed attitudes to women and their education. The key planks of the Enlightenment offered new understandings of the mind and its development. The philosopher John Locke believed the mind was a blank slate upon which any impression could be made and David Hartley's theory of associationism argued that understanding was formed through external impressions on the senses. It became harder to dismiss women, as Lord Chesterfield did, as 'only children of a larger growth' or to remain entrenched in the idea that they did not possess the faculty of reason.

Day's experiment with Sabrina aimed not to undermine traditional ideas of female subordination, because he retained the belief that women were created differently to men for the greater good of a well-balanced, ordered society. Instead, Day sought to demonstrate that female reason, if cultivated properly through education, would make them sensible, practical wives and mothers. That vital element of the Enlightenment, education, was the key - teaching girls that their naturally ordained place was in the home and that the role they undertook there was one of vital importance.

Education for girls was one of the major debates of the Enlightenment. Some women had already raised their voices and challenged the age-old prejudices. 'We are educated in the grossest ignorance,' said Lady Mary Wortley in 1753, 'and no art omitted to stifle our natural reason.' But voices like Lady Mary's were few and far between.

In practice education for girls was still heavily traditional and class-bound. Lower-class girls received little or no education and the daughters of the middling ranks were bred to be drawing room ornaments, restricted to the acquisition of 'accomplishments' – dancing, needlework, music, singing, and perhaps a foreign language such as French or Italian.

In Day's opinion, this education was disastrous: it taught girls merely to be coquettes who wasted their time and energies on frivolous activities that had no value. It was also dangerous for society, producing a generation of women who were only interested in the fashionable society of balls and pleasure gardens and more interested in their dress than in their husbands. For Day this was a



Anna Seward, poet and friend of Thomas Day, from John Jackson's *History of the City and Cathedral of Lichfield*, 1805.

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'perversion which makes women prefer lap-dogs to their own children'.

Day's education of Sabrina was a complete rejection of this. It shows a growing understanding that girls' education at the time was poor and even though nature might form girls to be wives and mothers, nurture was responsible for making them sensible, moral and intelligent ones.

Therefore Sabrina's education, as outrageous as it might seem to us, was rooted in a new belief in the potential that women held. It proclaimed a faith in education to nurture that potential, to create a new breed of wife who was sensible and rational and a worthy companion to the intelligent, creative and innovative men of the Enlightenment.

The Role of Marriage

Day was also asking serious questions about marriage, which to his credit, he saw as a vitally important aspect of society. He considered that marriage should be undertaken for the greater good, rather than as a union of economic interests which undermined natural affections.

Attitudes to marriage were changing, becoming less about dynastic ambitions and more companionable, but it was still very much bound by class assumptions, and wealthy families still wanted their sons and daughters to marry within their own ranks.

Day had no such aspirations. Independently wealthy, he desired to marry a woman without a fortune as proof of his devotion to her. He believed in the natural affection between husbands and wives, affections that bound them together in mutual understanding. He feared that emphasis on the frivolities of life undermined those natural affections and rendered husbands and wives indifferent to each other.

'A universal infidelity prevails,' he wrote to Edgeworth about the French, in whom Day saw England's future writ large unless men of character and courage did something to prevent it: 'the men can feel nothing but indifference for their nominal wives; hence all the ties of nature are broken through, all the sweet connections of domestic life unknown – husband, wife, father, son, and brother, are words without meaning.'

Day believed that when men of rank and fortune, such as himself were 'attached entirely to exteriors', it blinded them to the misery of others, 'which make them consider their inferiors less as men than beasts of burden, make them entirely indifferent to their wants, their miseries; a profusion in dress, in equipage, usurps the place of love and of generosity'.

This was the ultimate reason for the Sabrina experiment. Day wanted a wife who would 'soothe my soul to rest' and 'soften ev'ry care' so that he could work for the greater good of mankind. She would minister to him and raise his children, so that he could perform his civic duty and improve the lot of those less fortunate than himself. Day's 'duty to marry', was not only to himself, it was to society at large.

An Experiment of Its Time

Thomas Day's experiment with Sabrina Sidney exemplifies the extremes of the Enlightenment. It was an ambitious undertaking, even absurd in its attempt to mould a twelve-year-old girl into the perfect wife, without thought or concern for her opinions or sentiments. But it also shows the ideas that the Enlightenment was stimulating: a belief in the inherent reason of women, a move towards a model of marriage that prized mutual affection over solely financial wealth or status, a faith in education to improve the situation for women and offer them opportunities to be more than frivolous, fluffy-headed dolls, and an elevation of the roles of wife and mother.

It also demonstrates a willingness to try, to experiment and to risk the possibility of failure. In this Day was a true Lunar man, with an unwavering belief that improvement was possible and attainable.

Dr Kate Iles worked on the Revolutionary Players project (www.revolutionaryplayers.org.uk) and recently completed a PhD at the University of Birmingham on Sabrina Sidney.

Further Reading

Elizabeth Eger and Lucy Peltz, *Brilliant Women: Eighteenth-century Bluestockings* (National Portrait Gallery, 2008).

Sarah Knott and Barbara Taylor (eds.), *Women, Gender and Enlightenment* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2007).

Wendy Moore, *How to Create the Perfect Wife* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2013).

Karen O'Brien, *Women and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge University Press, 2009).

Jenny Uglow, *The Lunar Men* (Faber, 2002).