"All pent up together": representations of friendship in fictions of girls’ boarding schools, 1680-1800'


Published in: Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies

Document Version: Peer reviewed version

Queen's University Belfast - Research Portal:
Link to publication record in Queen's University Belfast Research Portal

Publisher rights
© 2017 British Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies. This work is made available online in accordance with the publisher’s policies. Please refer to any applicable terms of use of the publisher.

General rights
Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Queen's University Belfast Research Portal is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy
The Research Portal is Queen's institutional repository that provides access to Queen's research output. Every effort has been made to ensure that content in the Research Portal does not infringe any person's rights, or applicable UK laws. If you discover content in the Research Portal that you believe breaches copyright or violates any law, please contact openaccess@qub.ac.uk.
“All pent up together”: representations of friendship in fictions of girls’ boarding schools, 1680-1800

Satiric depictions of female assembly vastly outnumber positive ones throughout the eighteenth century. Of the countless fictions of gossiping tea-table tattlers, brawling parties of women, hoydenish female clubs, and rivalrous female factions which might be cited, Swift’s comment can be taken as exemplary: ‘a knot of ladies, got together by themselves, is a very School of Impertinence and Detraction; and it is well if those be the worst’. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that there have been remarkably few sustained studies of female homosociality in this period beyond the considerable body of important work on the Bluestockings and on lesbianism. While the Bluestockings provide a rich source of particular case studies, they form a highly specific group which, while influential, cannot be taken as axiomatic, at least not without further work. And important retrieval work on lesbianism has its own exclusions too – both of heterosexual women and of women, including schoolgirls, whose sexual orientations were unformed or unclear. Monograph studies by Sharon Marcus and by Penelope Anderson and Amanda Herbert have probed the complexities of female friendships in the Victorian and early modern periods respectively, but no comparable work on the eighteenth century has as yet emerged.

This essay examines fictions of girls’ schools as an important starting point to a consideration of female homosociality in the eighteenth century. These fictions are a useful, but hitherto largely overlooked, resource for an understanding of female-female relationships of various kinds, and particularly of the friendships which might be forged or shattered within wider social groups. While communal living in boys’ schools was underpinned by a discourse in which ‘emulation’ and ‘connections’ were important for future career-building, the importance of girls being educated together was never made. There was, apparently, no
ideological function of their being taught together in groups. The apparent purposelessness of girls being ‘all pent up together’, in the anxious terms of one contemporary commentator, clearly fed anxieties concerning girls’ schools. But, as this essay will argue, the absence of such arguments also gave a licence to the ways in which, increasingly, girls’ friendship could be viewed as both positive and enabling.

Michèle Cohen has written of a shift in the 1780s when those opposed to girls’ boarding schools increasingly adopted the language of ‘public’ schooling to emphasise a necessary distinction between how boys and girls should be educated. At public school, boys learn confidence, emulation and friendship, but none of these qualities were deemed either necessary or desirable for girls, who more properly should learn at home. The Rev John Bennett, the commentator referred to above, for example, argued that school friendships could lead boys to ‘worldly honours and advancement’, but were of no consequence for girls, whose primary goal was marriage. And the language used by Bennett to describe girls’ schools is particularly squeamish: a ‘common reservoir’ in which girls ‘insensibly convey an infection to each other by tales, sentiment, sympathy and friendship’ and in which ‘so many offensive breaths, all pent up together’ lead to a ‘total putrefaction of the moral air’. Bennett’s concerns were widely shared. Mary Wollstonecraft, for example, also clearly distrusted girls’ boarding schools, writing with dismay of the physical intimacies they encouraged in A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792):

I object to many females being shut up together in nurseries, schools, or convents. I cannot recollect, without indignation, the jokes and hoyden tricks which knots of young women indulged themselves in, when in my youth, accident threw me, an awkward rustic, in their way. They were almost on a par with the double meanings which shake the convivial table when the glass has circulated freely.
Against this widespread unease regarding girls’ schools, and the pervasive stereotype of squabbling or gossip-mongering female groups, the positive depictions of female friendship in fictions of girls’ schools, as in friendship poems, become remarkable challenges to that received view of female ‘homo-unsociability’.

While this essay is not in itself an explicit contribution to the current work of queering women’s writing, depictions of intense attachments between girls may well have the potential to be read as instantiations of a sapphic desire as yet unrecognised. Since the focus of the essay falls upon the fictional interactions of eighteenth-century girls with each other, it partakes of the continuum in which women who love and defend each other are richly interlinked. Indeed, that ‘friendship’ has often functioned euphemistically for same-sex desire is one reason why the complex histories of female homosociality have been obscured. In fictions of girls’ schools we encounter friendships developed beyond the bonds of family or marriage, in ways which remain difficult to theorise as kinship and sexuality dominate psychoanalytic models of sociability. Admittedly, a primary purpose of the commercial boarding school for girls in the period was to increase its pupils’ marriageability, and this explains both its emphasis upon the acquisition of accomplishments and its growing popularity with aspirant middle-class parents. However, as we will see, fictions of girls’ schools rarely addressed such aspirations in anything like an explicit manner, and in several striking examples, the desirability of marriage itself would be challenged. In these cases, uniquely, girls become figures of a femininity not yet – or perhaps not even ever – defined through marriage.

Girls’ schools, together with brothels, also offer us the only examples of female formal assembly in Britain in the eighteenth century, the sole counterparts to the coffee-houses, clubs and societies which are such a feature of the century’s self-consciously male associational culture. While no public schools or academies existed for girls throughout the long eighteenth
century, the period did witness a steady proliferation of different kinds of schools, including private boarding and day schools for those families which could afford to pay. This growth is evidenced in increasing, and increasingly vehement, printed attacks upon girls’ boarding schools in the later eighteenth century. Eighteenth-century references to public girls’ schools in the pamphlet and conduct literature are almost overwhelmingly negative with only those promoting commercial schools willing to defend them openly, if obviously strategically. By the last decades of the eighteenth century, discussions of the respective merits of home and public schooling for girls were frequent, but the judgement was almost invariably on the side of private tuition at home, unless there were obviously partial, commercial imperatives to supporting a boarding school. Erasmus Darwin, for example, whose daughters set up a boarding school for girls in Ashbourne in 1794, issued a prospectus for their school under the guise of an educational pamphlet: A Plan for the Conduct of Female Education in Boarding Schools (Derby, 1797). And, as we will see, The Lady’s Magazine (1770-1837) would offer endorsements of girls’ schools in both its editorial comments and in its schoolgirl contributions. More typical, however, was Vicesimus Knox’s argument that: ‘All sensible people agree in thinking, that large seminaries of young ladies, though managed with all the vigilance and caution which human abilities can exert, are in danger of great corruption. Vanity and vice will be introduced by some among a large number, and the contagion soon spreads with irresistible violence’ (1781).

While it has often seemed difficult to find supporters of public schools for girls in the period, there are a significant number of sources which have been overlooked in historical work on girls’ schooling thus far and the contribution they make to the eighteenth-century debate on female education deserves to be investigated. This essay surveys fictions of girls’ schools as imaginative spaces in which ideas of female community, sociability and friendship are explored and tested. The most interesting of these texts is also the best known – Sarah Fielding’s The
Friendship in fictions of girls’ schools

*Governess, or little female academy* (1749). Given the complexity of its narrative, and the failure of previous readings to capture some of its subtlety, this novel is given extended discussion. However it is also situated in a wider history of representations of girls’ schools – in fiction, plays, poetry, prints, journals and conduct literature – in order to demonstrate how Fielding’s important novel shifted the terms of the cultural representation of schoolgirls in this period. After Fielding’s account, little attention would be paid to the teaching of girls by male tutors, and a more obviously feminocentric, homosocial world would prevail in representations of girls’ schools. This shift, from the male tutor to the female teacher, suggests a wider transformation in cultural attitudes towards female homosociability. This essay, then, argues that fictional representations of girls’ boarding schools by women writers permitted a much more positive and nuanced view of female association than had been possible earlier in the century. First, however, I will look at those earlier depictions of girls’ schools which preceded the publication of Fielding’s landmark text.

**Early fictional representations of girls’ schools**

The century’s mostly caustic view of girls’ schools would be prefigured in the first sustained fictional representation of schoolgirls in this period: Thomas D’Urfey’s popular comedy, *Love for Money, or, The Boarding School* (1691). Several scenes of this play are set in a girls’ school, where two tutors, a dancing-master and a singing-master, scheme to elope with their giddy pupils. The schoolgirls are presented entirely comically, appearing as rowdy hoydens with insatiable appetites for bread and butter. They enter the play dancing and jumping about and quickly take to fighting with each other. We hear tales of how Molly like a ‘great Beare’ jumped on the back of the gardener as he stooped to gather salad leaves and how the clothes of all the schoolgirls require constant mending from their irrepressible ‘romping’. The plot motif of tutors eloping with their female pupils had precedents in the 1604 play *The Wit of a Woman*.
and, more recently, in Richard Head’s novel _The English Rogue_ (1665). D’Urfey’s Molly and Jenny, however, are entirely naïve about heterosexuality: Jenny asks the dancing master Coopee to explain to her what will happen after they marry and Coopee is in no hurry to tell her (p.45). And both girls are clearly more interested in cheesecakes and custards than they are in men. There are a couple of brief gestures towards heteronormativity: both girls accuse the other of peeping at Coopee when he was swimming and Molly concludes her part in the play by expressing a final preference for sex with her husband over bread and butter. But these are only fleeting and the emphasis falls elsewhere on their lack of interest in sex, other than in the sublimated forms of physical play and eating. There is also a hint of burgeoning sexuality in Jenny’s taunt to Molly that the ‘Maids won’t lye with you, you do I know what a bed’ (p.22), which suggests that while girls can discover masturbation at boarding school, their lack of knowledge of other kinds of sex allow would-be seducers to take advantage. And clearly the girls’ ability to scoff a dozen custards and thirteen cheesecakes at one sitting serves as a clear signal of the dangers of all kinds of appetite. After the secret marriage of the two girls and their tutors, the assembled company concludes the play with an explicit warning of the sexual risks run by sending girls to boarding school.

D’Urfey’s comedy was the most successful of this prolific playwright’s theatrical career. Just over forty years later, Charles Coffey’s ballad-opera version, _The Boarding-School_ (1733), kept its plot current. The pervasiveness of anxieties over sexual corruption in girls’ schools is evident also in a number of popular songs and prints. D’Urfey’s broadsheet ballad ‘Love for Money’, in which Coopee instructs his pupil in both dancing and sexual teasing, continued to circulate throughout the century. And in _The Boarding-School: A new Ballad_ (Dublin 1725), Parson Creed is summoned by a grimly toothless and thin-lipped matron when she spies Jack Passionate attempting to gain entrance into her school. An identical scenario is also evident in Philip Mercier’s painting, _A School of Girls_ (c.1738) in which an elderly schoolmaster chucks
a young girl under the chin, while five other girls stand waiting, the last of these suggestively shown adjusting her stocking. When the painting was engraved by John Faber in 1739, the print’s accompanying verses made the satirical warning more pointed: ‘See, with what Warmth the am’rous Dotard Grins’. Both explanation and warning, the poetry makes explicit what was only implied in the image itself: that the schoolmaster’s intentions, despite the appearance of some books on the table beside him, do not concern the girls’ education (see illustrations xx and xx).19

Depictions of sexual threat are thus the most typical feature of early representations of girls’ schools. The only exceptions to this I have found in the period 1680-1750 are a periodical essay and a Dublin-printed poem. The first of these is just as satirical as the D’Urfey and Coffey plays, although its target is the fashionable teacher of girls, not the girls themselves. In the Spectator (1711), Richard Steele mocked girls’ schools in the form of a hoax-advertisement, in which schoolgirls are drollly compared to birds taught to imitate the modish phrases of tea-tables and visiting days. Their schoolmistress advertises that she will coop them up in cages at the back of her house where they won’t be able to hear the language of the streets, such as ‘obscene songs, and immodest expressions’ from passers-by or the street-sellers’ cries of fish and card-matches.20 The imagery of the girls as birds suggestively recalls D’Urfey’s play, in which the schoolgirls were described as kittens, rabbits, ponies and chickens. Indeed, a feature of representations of groups of girls in this period is to describe them as animals (fawns, birds, apes, and partridges), a collective naming of girls which may intimate the uncertainty and ambivalence in which they are viewed.21 The satire of the Spectator essay, however, remains primarily targeted at the inept teacher, Mrs Tattle, whose sole qualification is her penury.

John Winstanley’s poem ‘Miss Betty’s Singing Bird’ offers a potentially more positive depiction of a group of schoolgirls in eighteenth-century Dublin.22 In two successive stanzas of lightly tripping iambic tetrameter couplets, the bird tells of contrasting hoydenish and well-
behaved young ladies. First, there is the behaviour to be avoided: ‘When Raisins, Sugar-plums
nor Figs / Will bribe them not to pull off Wiggs’, followed by a description of the pretty clothes
and jewels they might enjoy, should they be nicely behaved. As we will see, the model of
contrasting groups of girls would become a feature of fictional depictions later in the century.

While it is difficult to generalise about representations of schoolgirls when there are
relatively few descriptions of schools prior to the later eighteenth century, these examples do
serve to illustrate how Sarah Fielding was striking new territory with her sympathetic depiction
of a girls’ school in The Governess. In part at least, this is due to her novel’s reflection of
contemporary educational theory: the view, most influentially articulated by John Locke in
Some Thoughts concerning Education (1693), that children are not innately cruel or sinful but
made so by circumstance, and that education was as much about the acquisition of virtue as of
knowledge.23 Related to these views, however, is the novel’s probing of the dynamics of
community. Where earlier representations of girls’ schools barely paid any attention to the
relationship between the girls, articulating instead fears of sexual corruption and bad teaching,
Fielding’s novel, in contrast, would make the friendship between the girls its central element.

Female community in the making: The Governess, or, The Little Female Academy (1749)

When Sarah Fielding’s novel The Governess (1749) was first published, its title-page included
thirteen lines drawn from Helena’s speech to Hermia in Shakespeare’s A Midsummer Night’s
Dream in which she poignantly recalls their childhood friendship, beginning: ‘Shall we forget
the Counsel we have shar’d / The Sisters Vows ...’ (illustration xx).24 The lines lament the
passing of that bond of friendship, with Helena believing that Hermia has colluded with
Lysander and Demetrius to mock her (both men having suddenly and strangely switched their
affections from Hermia to her). But the emphasis of the epigraph falls not on Hermia’s
treachery, but rather on a rapturous celebration of the intimacy of their friendship, embroidering
one flower, sitting on one cushion, singing the same song, growing together as one ‘double cherry’. Unsurprisingly, then, in *The Beauties of Shakespeare* (1752), the lines would be excerpted under the heading ‘Female Friendship’.25

None of the novel’s modern critics comment on this choice, and the omission is symptomatic of the neglect of representations of female friendship both in *The Governess* in particular and, more broadly, in eighteenth-century literature. While a number of recent readings foreground the importance of ideas of community to Fielding’s *The Governess*, the reading outlined here extends those discussions in considering the implications of Fielding’s positive depiction of female assembly in relation to anti-feminist jibes which mocked rivalry between women as the most proverbial form of female-female relationships.26 Those attitudes, so commonplace as to be difficult to enumerate, are evident in John Hawkesworth’s *The Adventurer* (1753), in which interprets Hermia’s speech quite differently from the author of *The Beauties of Shakespeare*. In a fictional episode within the journal, Fanny reads this passage to her sister Harriet in an attempt to make amends after a quarrel, but the sisters proceed only to argue about how to interpret the play’s characters. This negative view of female-female enmity is then bolstered by the Adventurer’s subsequent visit to three female cousins, who also live inharmoniously.27

Fielding’s *The Governess* is thus relatively unusual in this period both in its commitment to exploring female friendship positively and in making a female group central to its narrative. While a number of earlier fictions featured friendship between women as a striking element of their plot, these did not make the female circle itself a central element. Fielding herself, in *The Adventures of David Simple* (1744), had included an unflattering depiction of an all-female conversazione in which the ladies’ literary talk deteriorates into a babble of competing pretensions, comparable only to the ‘Cackling of Geese, or the Gobbling of Turkeys’.28 But although *The Governess* is not afraid to engage with the theme of enmity
between women (indeed the centre of its own narrative, as we will see, is the overcoming of a pitched battle between the schoolgirls), it interrogates and challenges the stereotype of ‘she-romps’ by exploring the causes of such rowdy behaviour and, ultimately, the means of its reformation.29

Female friendship in the novel is not treated as something which is either intrinsic or easy: it must be forged and made. Fielding illustrates female community in the making and in so doing she counters the commonplace assumption that women are naturally envious and competitive, querulous and quarrelsome, by meeting it in its own terms. Fielding takes her community of girls from the conventional satirical depiction of hoydens to a harmonious circle of attachment and affection. Fielding’s opening depiction of the girls’ fighting like cats over a particularly desirable apple is consistent with the many negative depictions of female assembly, current then and since.30 But the structuring of Fielding’s novel is important in this regard, because this unseemly, delinquent behaviour is subsequently shown to be rooted, not in intrinsic faults or inevitable or essential petulance, but in corruptions introduced at home. When the girls arrive at the school and live together, their faults are no longer overlooked, indulged or encouraged, but instead come into abrupt conflict with those of their school-mates. In this way, the school is both the spark which ignites the conflicting claims of the girls and ultimately the means of reconciliation.

The reformation of the girls is not achieved in one moment or by one action, and certainly not by the instructions of their governess. Mrs Teachum’s punishment is self-consciously inferred, rather than stated (‘Mrs Teachum’s Method of punishing I never could find out’; p.53) and, at any rate, remains completely ineffectual. Indeed, on the following day, the girls fight just as much over who is most to blame for their punishment (pp.53-4). The girls themselves thank Jenny for the work of their reformations. Yet even after Mrs Teachum has congratulated Jenny on successfully correcting the girls’ behaviour (p.68), the girls quarrel over their
interpretations of the first fairy tale (p.86). And when they take their first walk to the dairy, just four days later, we see a glimpse of their continued desire for precedency: gathering wild flowers as they have been encouraged to do by Mrs Teachum, they all wish to present her with the best posy (p.108).

Readers are encouraged when the girls make their first visit to the dairy to think that they are already reformed characters. On the previous day, for example, the girls had cheerfully complied in postponing their story to accommodate the writing master and were rewarded by Mrs Teachum for their obedience (p.93). And at the dairy they are warmly praised for being ‘well-behaved young Ladies’ by the old mistress and invited to visit her often again (p.109). But the old woman’s daughter, Mrs Nelly, is not so indulgent, ushering the girls outside when she sees some of them dipping their fingers in the cream. The old woman is nearly seventy years of age and afflicted with the palsy, which leads Polly to ask her ‘Why she shook her Head so?’ and Patty to say ‘She hoped her Hair would never be of such a Colour’ (p.108). Jenny is worried that the old woman will be offended, but the woman herself says kindly ‘Oh! let the dear Rogues alone … I like their Prattle’ and treats the girls to ‘Plenty of Cream, Strawberries, Brown-bread, and Sugar’ and a gift of the best flowers from her garden (pp.108-9). At this point, we are encouraged to think that Jenny has been understandably cautious, Mrs Nelly rather surly, and the old woman kind and indulgent, while the girls themselves have been innocently, inadvertently, a little rude. Only retrospectively are we encouraged to think more severely of the girls. When they visit the dairy for a second time, Polly regrets her behaviour on the previous visit, promising that ‘she would not now say anything to her of her shaking Head, or her grey Hair’ (p.161). And Mrs Nelly, this time, is won over by the girls’ behaviour (p.161). This fixes the moment of the girls’ reformation as being at some point between the two visits, but the narrative frustrates any attempt to determine a precise moment in which this happens.
The reformation of the girls is, then, suggested as a gradual process, in which the telling of successive stories and the sharing of daily experiences lead to the formation of the girls as a happy community, under the leadership of Jenny Peace. While Jenny is a little above the other girls in terms of her age and moral maturity, she remains one of the group in a way which Mrs Teachum does not. Many critics have noted Mrs Teachum’s distance from the girls, commenting particularly on the way in which her school is run primarily through a system of surveillance, but they have not noted the ways in which Mrs Teachum is drawn equivocally.

For example, her lesson to the girls on the danger of giving money to the undeserving poor is openly challenged by the youngest of the girls, seven-year-old Polly (p. 60). And the sudden departure of Jenny provokes Polly to voice a startlingly explicit depreciation of her governess in an unflattering comparison with Jenny:

Indeed, indeed, Miss Jenny, you must not go; I shall break my Heart, if I lose you:

I’m sure we shan’t, nor we can’t, be half so happy, when you are gone, tho’ our Governess was Ten times better to us than she is. (p. 173)

That Jenny herself counsels the girls to hide their unhappiness from Mrs Teachum makes the criticism all the more severe: ‘for she might take it unkindly, that they should be so afflicted at the Loss of one Person, while they still remained under her indulgent Care and Protection’ (p. 174).

Readings which focus on the elements of surveillance and control in the novel over-emphasise the importance of Mrs Teachum and thus inevitably slight the centrality of Jenny. And in doing so, they replicate the changes which later writers of children’s literature made to Fielding’s model when they created the teacher as the central figure for their narratives. As Mika Suzuki showed in an important essay on the novel, Romantic-period adaptations would
foreground the importance of Mrs Teachum to their plots and in doing so, would push Fielding’s narrative in more conservative directions. However, as we will see, Suzuki did not consider a number of late century fictions of girls’ schools which continued to represent friendships between schoolgirls positively. It is to these largely overlooked fictions which I now turn.

Late century fictions of girls’ schools

Sarah Fielding wrote *The Governess* before the development of a tradition of school fiction, but the development itself was almost certainly due to her novel. While relatively few recorded responses to reading her book survive, we have clear evidence of its impact both in its popularity throughout the century and in the many imitations which it inspired. The prolific children’s author, Ellenor Fenn, for example, wrote under the pseudonym of ‘Mrs Teachwell’ and by the nineteenth century ‘Mrs Teach’em’ had become a proverbial phrase for a schoolmistress. However, in the second half of the eighteenth century, dialogues between a governess and her pupils would outnumber stories which depicted a community of schoolgirls, learning and amusing themselves together, as in Fielding’s *The Governess*. In these ‘governess dialogues’ very little attention is given to the relationships between the girls and thus while they are certainly interesting for studies of girlhood and education, they are of limited usefulness for a study of friendships between girls in the period.

However, there are at least eight fictions, in different genres and modes, which do explore associations of girls at school, although several of these do so in ways which highlight individual faults rather than consider how the friendships (or indeed antagonisms) between the girls might affect both their individual development and the school as a community. In *School Occurrences* (1783) by Fenn, the girls are divided between exemplary or, on the whole, good-hearted girls and naughty, badly-behaved girls. The book’s treatment of the most consistently
naughty of the girls, Miss Pert, is particularly interesting because, unusually for a didactic work of this kind, Mrs Teachwell professes herself unable to reform her: ‘As I cannot correct the fault in her, I comfort myself that she serves as a chorus, to remark upon the actors.’ Mrs Sprightly’s reply is: ‘I pity her friends’ (p.110). In Fenn’s *The Female Guardian* (1784), a continuation of her first school fiction, the same Miss Pert boasts of her ‘honesty’ in satirising and censuring those who make mistakes, and Mrs Teachwell notes that she was ‘not ill-disposed; she would do a kind act with satisfaction; and rejoiced at any good fortune which happened to another’.

But her satirical wit, which in a different context might be excused, is here roundly condemned. Like *School Occurrences*, *The Female Guardian* mostly consists of didactic advice which can now strike us as extremely conservative: warnings of the perils of parental neglect or overindulgence are continually repeated and, with this emphasis on the importance of home, the attitude towards female schools is often, at best, equivocal. Several of the girls under Mrs Teachwell’s care prove to be beyond correction (pp.68, 81). And, in an essay ostensibly contributed by one of the school’s former pupils, schooling for girls is judged to be ‘often necessary’ but also pernicious, so much so that the essay notes that there are now ‘far too many boarding schools for young ladies in England’ (p.29). These concerns notwithstanding, Mrs Teachwell’s own school at the Grove is called a ‘paradise’ in an opening letter from one of its pupils (p.13), who defends this word not just on the basis of the beautiful country seat and gardens in which the school is situated, but also in terms of the friendships she enjoys with particular girls there (p.14).

Similarly, a portrait of ‘Unassuming Beauty’ in the form of the pupil Eliza Finch draws upon a friendship poem by Elizabeth Rowe in its argument that beauty without conceit is never envied by other girls, but admired and loved (pp.24-5). So although Fenn’s two fictions of school admit the difficulties posed by mixing groups of girls, of very different personalities, it includes positive representations of female
solidarity and companionship in addition to its concerns over how wayward behaviour might spread between girls.

Dorothy Kilner’s fiction, *Anecdotes of a Boarding School* (1790), broadly shares Fenn’s ambivalence concerning schools for girls, as is immediately evident in the work’s subtitle, *An Antidote to the Vices of those Establishments.* The nine-year-old Miss Martha Beauchamp has been sent to school because of her mother’s bad health and her mother advises her to gain the good-will and love of the other girls by being polite and obliging and not to care if they dislike her because she won’t join in naughty behaviour (pp.14-15). In such a large school, she adds, Martha is likely to encounter both well and ill-behaved children, and thus it proves to be. Among the fifty-seven pupils at Mrs Steward’s establishment, Martha befriends Miss Kitty Long and Miss Mary Candid and makes enemies of a group of badly behaved girls, including her ill-chosen bedfellow Miss Grumpton. The contrasting models which these groups represent are exemplified in the manner in which they get dressed in the morning. While the naughty girls tease and torment each other, the four sisters help each other:

they stood one behind the other, lacing and pinning each other’s frocks, so that they were completed in the same time as it would have taken to dress a single one; all, except the eldest, who stood last, and would not suffer her own frock to be pinned, till her sisters were quite ready for going down, and then one of them finished her. Most of the other young ladies likewise readily assisted each other in tying tucker-strings, and those kind of little matters which they could not manage to do for themselves. (pp.60-61)

In stark contrast, Miss Crick, Miss Hastings, Miss Trip and Miss Grumpton, despite being ‘friends’, are spiteful and unkind to one another:
If one wanted the comb, the other was sure to toss it to the farther end of the room; and if one dropped her pincushion, another would run and give it a kick under the bed, just as she was stooping to pick it up: in return for which, the owner of the pincushion clawed off her adversary’s cap, and tossed it upon the tester of the bed: that again gave fresh provocation to the wearer of it, who sought to be revenged by throwing away her antagonist’s gloves, or whatever else she could first get hold of. And they proceeded quarrelling, snatching, teasing, and hindering each other through the whole ceremony of dressing. (p.61)

These contrasting kinds of female group behaviour are thus typical of the depiction of girls’ schools in the later century and mark a change from the idealised account of Fielding’s finally harmonious school.

In later eighteenth-century depictions of schoolgirls, then, rival groups are a common feature of school-life. Martha is gently mocked by the narrator at one point for thinking that ‘all wickedness was collected into that one school, and no other place upon the earth could be found equally productive of it’ when only some of the girls are naughty (pp.34-5). And her mother’s reply is that there is little point in her moving school, since naughty children exist everywhere. However, positive models of female friendship offer counterweights to the prevailing anti-feminist stereotype of quarrelling, ‘unsisterly’ women. And in Kilner’s fiction in particular, some high spirits are permitted to the ‘good girls’. When Kitty tells Martha of the fun the fourteen girls in her bedroom sometimes have together after lights out, for example, she notes: ‘sometimes we are so merry! we all get out of bed, and play at blind-man’s-buff, or dance about in the dark: then if we hear any noise, and think any body is coming, away we all run helter-skelter, to get into our beds’ (p.45). If they are discovered, however, they will have
Friendship in fictions of girls’ schools

dry bread and ‘nasty poison’ water-gruel for breakfast as a punishment. Kitty is not a paragon of perfection in the way in which Mary Candid is: Mary notes that she is good-natured but ‘apt to be careless, to neglect her tasks, and not attend to what is said to her’ (p.68). But there is little sense here that Kilner would necessarily approve of Mrs Steward’s punishment.42

Martha’s story ultimately has a happy ending, but it is a slightly unexpected one. After several major incidents with Miss Grumpton and her gang (including a physical fight when the girls steal one of her mother’s letters), Martha’s mother unpredictably arrives and abruptly takes her home. Despite the friendship of Mary and Kitty, both of whom are kind, and the gentle care of Mrs Steward, Martha is ecstatic at leaving, having never reconciled herself to life in the school. Her father’s initial prediction, made on the morning when she left home, thus proves only partially correct: ‘I doubt not but amongst the fifty-seven little girls that her school consists of, you will meet with many agreeable play-fellows, who will teach you an hundred games that you never thought of before; and in a little time you will be as merry as any of them’ (pp.23-4). Beverly Lyon Clark has argued that the book is ultimately dubious about the value of boarding schools for young ladies, particularly in relation to the dangers of peer influence.43 But like the other fictions of girls’ schools considered here, Martha does enjoy positive friendships with a small group of girls and, although that might appear a small matter, its consequence is greater when set against the historical context of attitudes towards all-female assembly in which groups of women are rarely considered in a positive light.

An example of a less obviously conservative treatment of girls’ schooling is found in the anonymously published play The Governess, or the Boarding-School Dissected (1785). This play includes a female character not entirely dissimilar from Fenn’s Miss Pert, but here she is called Miss Witty and her verbal sparring against a ‘confederacy’ of naughty girls is not condemned (p.16). The ring-leader of the naughty girls is Miss Maline, captured here in a teacher’s exasperation after she pushes one of the girls into a ditch on a walk: ‘We never go
abroad, if she is with us, but we return with torn frocks, scratched faces, sprained ankles, and broken fans [... she] is a bad example to others; and I’m sure there will be no good order in the school while she remains in it’ (p.8). The governess, Mrs Teachwell, admits that she keeps her at the school because her family pays handsomely, while noting that all other schools are compelled to such exigencies. The text’s concern with the specificities of schooling, such as the problems of unqualified teachers and high costs, is consistent with its obvious purpose: this well-regulated school is offered as an advertisement for the ‘Female Academy in 103 Hatton Street’ identified on its title-page as the location from which copies of the play could be bought.\textsuperscript{44} Ellenor Fenn and Dorothy Kilner, in contrast, were not themselves school-teachers and did not need to proselytise on behalf of boarding schools.

Like the author of \textit{The Governess, or the Boarding School Dissected}, Sarah Maese also openly advertised her own school in publishing a fictional account, entitled \textit{The School, being a series of letters between a young lady and her mother} (1766-72). Published serially in three volumes, the first two volumes advertise Mrs Maese’s school for girls in Bath, a school for which no record otherwise exists. As its title notes, the novel relates a series of letters exchanged between a mother and her daughter, the seventeen year old Maria Milton, while she attends school. It follows the model of Fielding’s novel more closely than the fictions by Fenn and Kilner and the play just discussed in showing how the school has a positive effect upon the girls who attend: Miss Cummings is cured of tale-telling; Miss James of lying; Miss le Maine of frivolity and affectation; and Miss Wilkins of pedantry. (Miss Wilkins previously thought the crime of a monosyllable ‘an heinous offence against good language’.)\textsuperscript{45} As with Fielding’s \textit{The Governess}, all of these faults have been cultivated at home, where parents, not school, are to blame. And reformations are sometimes effected through the behaviour of the other girls, rather than the encouragement of the teachers.
When Maria first joins the school she is assigned a bedroom with a pupil eight years younger than her, according to the usual practice of the school: ‘perhaps to avoid the quarrels which might arise between girls of nearly equal ages’ (I, p.4). Later we learn that careful policing of bedroom allocation is important to avoid reprehensible behaviour from catching. The absurdly vain Miss le Maine, for example, is given one of the governesses as a bedfellow and a particular friendship is encouraged between her and Maria, since she is thought to be less susceptible to corruption than the younger girls. The most explicit statement of the importance of female friendship comes in Volume 3, when Maria’s mother writes not only that ‘the friendship of a truly worthy person [is] the most valuable treasure this world can afford us’ but that ‘the chief part of your happiness in this life, and, perhaps, much of it in the other, must depend on your friendships’ (III pp.19, 23).

From her first letter, Frances Milton makes female friendship and relationships the most significant element of her daughter’s life in school. In such a ‘large society’, she warns Maria, she will possibly find only a few who will become friends, so that to distinguish true from false friends is of the utmost importance (I pp.18-9). Later she laments that she had always presumed a school education would teach girls how to socialise on friendly and polite terms with diverse people. Her own experience of school – a one-week stay when a close relation was ill – had sadly taught her that children preferred to quarrel and tease rather than please each other (II pp.290-2). In her account, learning friendship is more important than learning lessons:

ill humour is a greater fault, than a little inattention to their learning; for it is not only a moral evil, but is of more lasting ill consequence, as it will be apt to increase by age; and she who in youth has been permitted to quarrel with her schoolfellows, is too likely to make a turbulent wife and a petulant friend. (II p.292)
Mrs Wheatley’s school, however, the book is at pains to insist, is much more successful than the one attended by Frances Milton, with the governesses gently introducing new scholars and correcting faults with almost imperceptible steps, so that general ‘peace and amity’ are maintained (II p.321). And, across the three volumes, Maese sketches a particular friendship for Maria, as she grows increasingly close to Miss Lenthall. When Miss Lenthall becomes seriously ill, Maria’s first act of open disobedience is to tend to her, even when her fever is infectious (though this, crucially, is unknown to Miss Lenthall herself).

Much of this appears to anchor the book in a promotion of conservative morality – there’s that clause, quoted above, of how learning friendships in adolescence is preparation not only for later friendships with women, but also for the experience of being a good wife. But the novel also includes striking defences of female-centred history and of female claims to rationality and these elements influence how we read the delineation of female friendship too. Maria’s closest friend, Miss Lenthall, for example, determinedly looks forward to a single life: ‘I think I shall be in no hurry to put my happiness, for which I seem to have all requisites, into the power of another’ she says to her governess, Mrs Wheatley, adding ‘Marriage may be for the good of the community, but I am not sure it is for mine’ (II p.295). And a number of additional interpolated tales also feature virtuous women who prefer not to marry, or at the very least, not to marry yet.

The emphasis in Maese’s fiction on the importance of female friendship is also a feature of Charles Allen’s anonymously published, *The Polite Lady: or, a course of female education* (1760). While this work is similar to Maese’s in many regards – it too is written as a series of letters between a mother and her daughter who is attending boarding-school – it remains a more conservative treatment. Of the letters written to Sophia while she is at school, the issue of friendship with the other girls is given much more extensive treatment than any other aspect as being one of the most important elements in life (p.40). And when Sophia writes that she has
found one pupil who might become a friend, her mother replies that she is ‘glad to hear, that amongst twenty or thirty young ladies [...] you can find even one properly qualified for being your friend: when you come to London, you will not find one in five hundred …’ (p.71). This work is closer to the genre of conduct literature than to a novel like Sarah Fielding’s, or, even, Sarah Maese’s. However the prospect of schooling is clearly being seen as an increasingly common one for girls in the later eighteenth century. And while negative experiences of female community are clearly feared, like all of the fictions considered here, there is no blanket distrust of female assembly.

These more positive representations of girls’ schools are further enhanced when we consider the evidence suggested by *The Lady’s Magazine* (1770-1837). From its first issues onwards, the magazine engaged positively with girls’ schools, in including a significant number of pieces submitted by schoolgirls and in periodic editorial comments and letters from readers which gave explicit endorsement to what these contributions implicitly represented.47 Many of its stories also featured girls whose experience of schooling was viewed as both positive and normative. One particularly notable story is that of ‘The Female Friends’ (1771), which embeds its narrative of the affirming, supportive friendship of two friends who met at school within an explicit celebration of girls’ schools. The following observation forms part of the story’s initial framing: ‘Alliances formed at school are not only more strong, but likewise more permanent than those which are made in our more natural years; and are not only more lasting, but likewise more pure and disinterested’.48 In the story itself, Lucinda supports Caroline financially but this secret is revealed only on their death-beds, as Caroline, having nursed Lucinda, likewise catches the fatal disorder. The story concludes rapturously: ‘How beautiful is female friendship! How amiable is disinterested benevolence!’.

The last fiction of a girls’ school in this period is the most complex of these later representations: Maria Edgeworth’s story of ‘The Bracelets’ (written in 1787, and first
published in 1800). This narrative carefully explores the relationship between Cecilia and Leonora, and is distinctive in continually placing the dynamics of their friendship within those of the group of twenty schoolgirls. When Cecilia wins the first bracelet, the prize for her accomplishment in painting and embroidery, the girls crowd around her and she becomes their general favourite. And then when she breaks Louisa’s china mandarin, the schoolgirls laugh with her as the figurine’s head rolls along the gravel walk. ‘At any other time they would have been more inclined to cry with Louisa’, the narrator notes, ‘but Cecilia had just been successful, and sympathy with the victorious often makes us forget justice’ (p.9). Later, the girls turn against Cecilia when she torments Louisa in a jealous moment, throwing away the strawberries Louisa has been gathering for Leonora, but in her conscious striving to win the second bracelet, a prize for ‘amiability’, Cecilia regains the fondness of many of the girls. Leonora, in contrast, often acts against the group. She is the only voice to dissent from Cecilia’s laughter at the broken mandarin, and she attempts to shield Cecilia from the ill favour of the girls after the strawberry incident. Their respective relationships with the wider group underpin the governess’s distinction between Cecilia’s ‘good nature’ and Leonora’s ‘good temper’:

you are good-natured, Cecilia, for you are desirous to oblige, and serve your companions; to gain them praise, and save them from blame; to give them pleasure, and relieve them from pain: but Leonora is good-tempered, for she can bear with their foibles, and acknowledge her own; without disputing about the right, she sometimes yields to those who are in the wrong; in short, her temper is perfectly good, for it can bear and forbear (pp.25-6)

This contrast makes the fiction’s balancing of Cecilia and Leonora all the more complex. Many are led by Cecilia while ‘none were ever governed’ by Leonora (pp.5-6). Cecilia
is ambitious to do the right thing; Leonora by instinct can do no wrong. Cecilia is anxious to oblige; Leonora unwilling to offend (p.43). And these distinctions are traced to their different upbringings: Cecilia was taught by her father and brother to be ‘enterprising’ and ‘independent’; Leonora, taught by her mother ‘in a manner more suited to her sex’, is yielding and compliant (p.42). But whereas this appears to give a preference to Leonora’s ‘femininity’, the narrator also notes how Cecilia’s ‘active’ love is preferred by the girls to the ‘passive’ love bestowed by Leonora. The girls’ admiration of Cecilia is inspired by both the generosity with which she treats them and that of their reciprocal favour. The admiration due to Leonora is that of just acknowledgement of her virtue. ‘Though Cecilia’s companions might not know all this in theory’, the narrator concludes, ‘they proved it in practice; for they loved her in a much higher proportion to her merits, than they loved Leonora’ (pp.44-5).

Critical discussion of the fiction has focused exclusively on the contrast between Cecilia and Leonora, particularly in relation to the gendered way in which they are distinguished. However, these accounts do not consider the two girls in relation to the group of schoolgirls, in which their behaviour is always contextualised. The narrator attempts to be even-handed in her judgement of Cecilia and Leonora: for example, both girls fail, in quite different ways, to be effective nurses to Louisa when she is suffering from measles (p.46). And the prize of the second bracelet – a symbolically charged bracelet made of the entwined locks of all the girls in the school – is ultimately given to neither Cecilia nor Leonora, both of whom relinquish a claim to it in offering it to the other, but to Louisa. Louisa becomes a convenient – and quickly accepted – winner: “Louisa! oh yes, Louisa”, exclaimed every body with one voice’ (p.78). And Cecilia’s climactic betrayal of Leonora – when she sells her gift from Leonora in order to buy a beautiful China figurine for Louisa – dramatises the ways in which friendships compete
as much as they reinforce. Louisa’s final act of friendship is to attempt to acquire for Cecilia what she most desires: the approbation of the group, in the winning of the bracelet made of locks of hair.

The complexity of the psychology of friendship here is comparable to that of Sarah Fielding’s *The Governess* as Edgeworth manoeuvres the second competition so that, in Mitzi Myers’s phrase, she ‘ingeniously makes it possible for everyone to “win”’. And while the final words are given to the governess, and appear to validate the model of Leonora’s ‘feminine’ behaviour, Cecilia’s active pleasing of the schoolgirls is also evident late in the story, when Leonora’s comparative unpopularity is noted (pp.69-70). Thus, in their analysis of the story, critics such as Myers and Robinson have noted how ‘sympathetic’ Cecilia remains as a figure. The ‘even-handedness’ of the narrator imbues the story with the kind of ambiguity which is obviously not a feature of openly didactic works. But it is also due to the story’s constant location of its two central protagonists in the setting of the school and its recognition that their identities, and their reputations, are formed inter-subjectively, both with each other and with the other girls.

**Conclusion**

Unlike those who argued that the formation of friendships, or the desirability of emulation were inimical to girls, these fictions do not view female homosociality as inherently dangerous. In Maria Edgeworth’s story ‘The Bracelets’, the girls are praised for being ‘emulous but not envious of each other’ (p.3). And in Sarah Maese’s *The School*, Maria’s mother argues that men cannot experience the same intensity of emotion in friendship: ‘either their passions or business exclude the purer affections from their hearts; men have their intimacies and connexions, but real friendship is seldom found amongst them, at least, not after their early youth’ (III p.23). This offers a striking inversion of earlier views of friendship, which, from
Aristotle and Cicero until the seventeenth century, had argued that women were incapable of forming friendships.52

Later century depictions of girls’ schools thus, like The Governess before them, offer significant defences of female friendship. Notwithstanding fears of peer ill-influence or the reality of antagonisms and quarrels, they celebrate the possibility of supportive, affectionate bonds between girls. This runs strikingly counter to other fictions of the period. While the friendship between Clarissa and Anna Howe in Richardson’s popular novel offered a widely accepted representation of a close friendship between women, for example, such friendships were forged in private domestic settings, not within wider groups of female-only assembly which were so reviled in the period. Beverley Lyon Clark has written of how the school functions as a ‘peculiarly marginal institution’ but one within which ideas of community and of socialisation can be explored.53 School fictions offer a space in which wider patterns of assembly can be explored, beyond the intimacy of only two. And these later fictions were undoubtedly inspired and emboldened in their defences by Fielding’s The Governess as a precursor text.

Of the texts discussed in this essay, only Sarah Fielding’s The Governess has received critical interest in recent decades. This essay has sought to demonstrate that the full significance of her novel can only be seen in relation to the wider contexts, of fictional representations of girls’ schools and of female assembly more generally, which it both challenged and shaped. As Sharon Marcus’s important work on female friendship in Between Women (2007) has reminded us, bonds between women are not necessarily and certainly not intrinsically ‘subversive’. In her study of the period 1830-1880, female friendships work more often than not to sustain rather than to challenge patriarchal standards, even heterosexuality itself. In the eighteenth century, however, the stereotypes and commonplace assumptions about female assembly were so pervasive, that more positive depictions of female community—such as that found in these
friendships of girls’ schools, as well as in obviously landmark texts such as Richardson’s *Clarissa* or Sarah Scott’s *Millenium Hall*—suggest an attempt to challenge a prevailing view rather than being dominant in their own right. While enabling representations of female assembly may have been numerically small, their publication and dissemination, in texts which were widely known at that time, remains a facet of associational culture in the eighteenth century which we have yet to fully understand.

1 Jonathan Swift, ‘Letter to a very young lady on her marriage’, *Miscellanies*, 2 vols. (London, 1727), II p.326. For illustrative examples of satirical female clubs, see the representations of the ‘Club of She-Romps’, ‘Club of female rakes’, ‘Chit-Chat Club’, and ‘Widows’ Club’ in *The Spectator*, 217 (8 November 1711), 336 (26 March 1712), 560 (28 June 1714), 561 (30 June 1714), 573 (28 July 1714) and of the ‘Fiddle Faddle Club’ in *The Grub-Street Journal* (10 May 1733). For attacks on the tea-table as the site of malicious gossip, see comments throughout the essay ‘On Tea-Tables and Visiting Days’, including the following: ‘Scarce any Matter escapes an Assembly of Women, who with their searching Instruments their Tongues, ferret out the most private Transactions of Families, and like Birds of Prey fall on every Thing that their unmerciful Claws will let ‘em’ (*Serious and comical essays [...] By a person of quality* [London, 1710], pp.36-43 [p.40]; and Laetitia Pilkington’s comment: ‘I know a very ingenious gentleman who, whenever he sees a parcel of females seated at their tea, names the chamber *Pandemonium*’ (*Memoirs of Laetitia Pilkington*, ed. A.C. Elias, 2 vols. [Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1997], I p.233). Examples of denunciations of this kind are too numerous to detail exhaustively and can be found in letters and diaries, fiction, drama and poetry, pamphlets and broadsheets.
Friendship in fictions of girls’ schools


4 [John Bennett], *Strictures on Female Education; Chiefly in Relation to the Culture of the Heart* (London, 1787), p.141.


6 See Bennett (1787), pp.138-41.

7 Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (Penguin, 1985), p.236. It must be noted, however, that Wollstonecraft had moved from the preferred model of education at home in *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787) to that of national, co-educational day-schools in *A Vindication*, partly because the latter permitted the ‘social affections’ to develop.
The classic account of the ‘lesbian continuum’ was articulated by Adrienne Rich in her essay ‘Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence’ (1980) and continued in work by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick.

In le Prince de Beaumont’s work, the governess Mrs Affable holds a private meeting with the older girls as the younger ones need not discuss marriage just yet: Jeanne-Marie le Prince de Beaumont, _The Young Ladies Magazine_, 4 vols. (London: J. Nourse, 1760) III pp.16-7. See also note 46 below.


For useful historical accounts of the late eighteenth-century female teacher, see Susan Skedd, ‘Women teachers’ (1997); Mary Clare Martin, ‘Marketing Religious Identity: Female Educators, Methodist Culture, and Eighteenth-Century Childhood’ and Carol Percy, ‘Learning and Virtue: English Grammar and the Eighteenth-Century Girls’ School’, both in _Educating the Child in Enlightenment Britain: Beliefs, Cultures, Practices_, eds. Mary Hilton and Jill Shefrin (Ashgate, 2009). Significantly, the editors of this latter volume write in their introduction that: ‘Most women teachers have remained largely invisible outside their fictional representations in contemporary novels’ (p.13). Male tutors continued to teach girls, especially as specialist, visiting tutors in girls’ schools, but increasing concerns about the
propriety of male tutors can be seen in Priscilla Wakefield’s comments in 1798 (quoted in Skedd, p.121.

14 *Love for Money, or the Boarding School* (London, 1691). I omit here texts such Margaret Cavendish’s *The Female Academy* (1662) and Mary Astell’s *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (1694, 1697) which depict idealised communities of female scholars rather than contemporary girls’ schools.

15 In the 1604 play, four young schoolgirls outwit their fathers’ in eloping with suitors disguised as various tutors and in Head’s novel, the protagonist turns transvestite in order to gain access to a girls’ boarding school. That the name of Head’s protagonist, Meriton, is also that of D’Urfey’s hero in *Love for Money* suggests he was familiar with the novel.

16 D’Urfey’s innuendo here precedes the text which, it has been claimed, first identified masturbation as a shameful act and a source of cultural anxiety: *Onania; or, The Heinous Sin of Self Pollution, and all its Frightful Consequences, in both Sexes, Consider’d* (London, c.1712). See Thomas W. Laqueur, *Solitary Sex: A Cultural History of Masturbation* (New York: Zone Books, 2003).

17 See Charles Coffey, *The Boarding-School, or the Sham-Captain, an opera* (London, 1733). After four printings in 1691, D’Urfey’s play was reprinted in London (1696, 1724) and in Dublin (1726) but was replaced thereafter in both print and performance by Coffey’s ballad-opera.


19 Copies of the print are held in the Yale Center for British Art (Paul Mellon Fund. B1970.3.889) and the British Museum (2010,7081.3323).

Friendship in fictions of girls’ schools

See D’Urfey’s epilogue to *Dido and Aeneas* (1689) in which the girls of Josiah Priest’s school are compared to ‘nimble fawns and birds’; John Locke’s reference to girls as ‘little apes’ (*Some Thoughts concerning Education*); and *The Governess, or the Boarding-School Dissected* (London, 1785), p.5.

Poems written occasionally by John Winstanley ... interspers’d with many others ... by several Ingenious Hands (Dublin, 1742), pp.177-79.

The Governess; or, Little Female Academy (London, 1749), title-page. The quotation was shortened to five lines of verse in the second edition.


Linda Bree’s pioneering study, *Sarah Fielding* (New York: Twayne, 1996), remains the only monograph study of the author and, in its argument that *The Governess* promotes the ideal of an autonomous female morality, anticipates several more recent interpretations which view the novel as broadly progressive in its attitude towards the schoolgirls. See in particular Sara Gadeken, “‘A Method of Being Perfectly Happy’: Technologies of Self in the Eighteenth-Century Female Community’, *Eighteenth-Century Novel*, 1 (2001): 217-235 and Aileen Douglas, ‘Women, Enlightenment and the Literary Fairy Tale in English’, *Journal for Eighteenth Century Studies*, 38.2 (2015): 181-94. Gadeken’s argument that the novel is primarily concerned with the creation of community is one which this essay also advances, although her principle focus is on the ways in which Fielding challenges Lockean theories of social contract. In Douglas’s reading, the girls are encouraged to be active participants in interpretation and in the fashioning of self and community. Her conclusions are strikingly consonant with those argued in this essay, although her focus is upon reading and education, rather than the sociability which is the primary interest here.

Friendship in fictions of girls’ schools


29 For an influential depiction of ‘she-romps’, see Eustace Budgell’s account of the ‘Club of She-Romps’ in *The Spectator*, 217 (8 November 1711).


31 Jenny’s situation in the school is similar to that of a ‘half-boarder’, an older pupil (usually aged between 14 and 18) who received tuition but also supervised younger children in their lessons. See Skedd, pp.114-5.

32 Two exceptions are Linda Bree’s comment that the fairy tales in the novel enable Fielding ‘to convey moral lessons more radical than those endorsed by the overtly authoritative voice of Mrs Teachum’ (*Sarah Fielding*, p.68) and Aileen Douglas’s argument that, in depicting Mrs Teachum’s opposition to fairy tales, Fielding acknowledges, but does not endorse, such criticisms (‘Women, Enlightenment and the Literary Fairy Tale’, p.186).


34 Mika Suzuki, “The Little Female Academy and *The Governess*”, *Women’s Writing*, 1.3 (1994): 325-339. Aileen Douglas also notes that the change in Jenny’s age, from fourteen to sixteen, in Sherwood’s adaptation distances her further from the other girls and makes her ‘quasi-monitorial’ (p.193 n.22).

Twenty-one editions were published by 1800, in London, Dublin, Cork, Belfast, Leipzig, Wästerås, and Philadelphia, and at least fifteen imitations had appeared by the same year. For a full list see Jilly Grey’s edition of the novel (Oxford UP, 1968).


37 A formal distinction between a ‘school’ and a governess supervising a small number of children is often difficult to make, since many commercial schools were run as ‘domestic’ ventures. For the purpose of this essay, I focus only on those fictions which explore the dynamics between female friends within a wider group of girls.

38 [Ellenor Fenn], School Occurrences: supposed to have arisen among a set of young ladies, under the tuition of Mrs Teachwell, and to be recorded by one of them (London, 1783).

39 [Ellenor Fenn], The Female Guardian (London, 1784), p.74.

40 See also the depiction of the same school in Fenn’s Juvenile Tatler (London, 1789), pp.vii-vii.

41 [Dorothy Kilner], Anecdotes of a Boarding School; or, An Antidote to the Vices of those Establishments (London, 1790), p.vii.

42 A later ‘governess dialogue’ would note that the school’s chief punishment was to deny the girls the company of others: The governess, or evening amusements at a boarding school (1800), p.2.


45 Sarah Maese, The School, being a series of letters between a young lady and her mother, 3 vols. (1766-72), p.11.
One girl, after several years of study, refuses several excellent offers of marriage, as she does not wish to marry until she has proven herself reformed of her youthful indiscretion, an attempted elopement (II p.41). Note also the hint in The Governess that Jenny’s future marriage will impinge upon the girls’ attempts to maintain their friendship when Jenny notes: ‘I hope a Friendship, founded on so innocent and so good a Foundation as ours is, will always subsist, as far as shall be consistent with our future Situations in life’ (p.174; emphasis added). Marriage as a ‘happy ending’ is also absent from the central story of Princess Hebe, in which she resumes the throne as a virgin queen (p.140). In Fenn’s The Female Guardian, Mrs Teachwell ostentatiously omits a story of gaining a wife as she does not approve of tales of love and courtship (p.120).

See, for example, ‘Essay on the use of boarding schools’, Vol.2 (September 1771), 114-5; letter to the editor by ‘Harriot Modesta’, Vol.4 (March 1773), 132; editorial address, Vol.5 (Jan Supplement 1774), 61; editorial address, Vol.8 (January 1777), [np]; ‘On the education at Boarding-Schools’, Vol.17 (September 1786), 484-6.


how to get what one wants in a world that’s experienced as intersubjective and communal’ (p.102); however, the essay itself focuses only on Cecilia and Leonora.

51 Myers writes that, in contrast to Fielding, Edgeworth ‘doesn’t portray the shift from disharmony to community as instantaneous and unproblematic’ (p.100). However, as the discussion above demonstrates, that view underestimates the complexity of Fielding’s own narrative.

52 Negative views of friendship between women continued to circulate within the eighteenth century, of course: see, for example, John Gregory’s claim in 1774 that ‘at first view’ women’s friendships with men are ‘more eligible’ than those with women, and the greater emphasis given to courtship and marriage than to friendship in the chapter in which this comment is contained: John Gregory, *A Father’s Legacy to his Daughters* (London, 1774; 2nd ed), p.74.