



Conduct Books and the History of the Ideal Woman

By *Tabitha Kenlon*

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A chronicle of the presentation of women in conduct manuals

The longest-running war is the battle over how women should behave. “Conduct Books and the History of the Ideal Woman” examines six centuries of advice literature, analyzing the print origins of gendered expectations that continue to inform our thinking about women’s roles and abilities. Close readings of numerous conduct manuals from Britain and America, written by men and women, explain and contextualize the legacy of sexism as represented in prescriptive writing for women from 1372 to the present. While existing period-specific studies of conduct manuals consider advice literature within the society that wrote and read them, “Conduct Books and the History of the Ideal Woman” provides the only analysis of both the volumes themselves and the larger debates taking place within their pages across the centuries. Combining textual literary analysis with a social history sensibility while remaining accessible to expert and novice, this book will help readers understand the on-going debate about the often-contradictory guidelines for female behavior.

Contents

Acknowledgements; Explanatory Note; Introduction: Woman as She Should Be; 1. A Good Woman Is a Godly Woman, Obviously; 2. Conduct for Those Who Are Not Queen; 3. Look but Don’t Talk: Reflections of the Ideal; 4. Playing the Part as Nature Intended; 5. Victoria’s Angels; 6. Suffrage, Little Wives and Career Girls; 7. Feminism Changes Everything, Right? Right?; Coda: An Ideal End; References; Index.

About the Author(s) / Editor(s)

Tabitha Kenlon is assistant professor of English at American University in Dubai. Her research concentrates on representations of women and the manipulation of genre in fiction, nonfiction and drama, with a focus on eighteenth-century Britain.

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