Forster’s Females: Gender Restrictions and Breakthroughs in *Howards End*

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E.M. Forster’s *Howards End* is a novel predominantly about relationships. As the book’s epigraph, “Only connect …” implies, the characters spend the story struggling to find common ground in a disjointed society. One can best understand the divisive issues of this society—class, gender—by studying the characters’ relationships to one another. The women’s roles in the novel, in particular, can be analyzed in terms of their relationship with one central male character. The majority of the story’s women¹—Ruth Wilcox, Jacky Bast, and Margaret Schlegel—either fall in line with or defy contemporary gender roles based on their respective relationships with one man: Henry Wilcox.

In his attitudes towards women, Henry Wilcox represents the everyman of his time; he “is a charming antifeminist” (Finkelson 105). He considers them the inferior sex, good for entertainment and child-rearing, but not to be taken seriously: “Man is for war, woman for the recreation of the warrior […] She cannot win in a real battle, having no muscles, only nerves” (Forster 205). As a man, he believes himself superior in both strength and mental capacity; he also holds women to a much stricter moral code than his own sex. Altogether, Henry “represents the conventional, conservative masculine view of women at this time” (Longmuir 7). Therefore, the behavior of the three women characters towards Henry can be considered their response to men in general. Further, since gender roles are determined by the interactions between the sexes, one can deduce each woman’s degree of compliance with the standard social positions reserved for women of their time (i.e. during the Edwardian period).

First, one must consider Ruth Wilcox (née Howard). As Henry’s first wife, she holds the longest association with Mr. Wilcox. Of the three women, her relationship with Henry is perhaps the most well-suited—certainly the least troubled. Through the long years of her marriage, she always defers to her husband’s judgment; according to Henry’s memory, “they had never disputed” (Forster 72). Her constant compliance is not driven by natural pacifist tendencies (though she possesses those as well), but rather because she genuinely believes Henry’s mental faculties to be superior to her own. The undisturbed harmony of their marriage derives in large part from Ruth’s ingenuous world-view:
Ruth knew no more of worldly wickedness and wisdom than did the flowers in her garden or the grass in her field. Her idea of business—“Henry, why do people who have enough money try to get more money?” Her idea of politics—“I am sure that if the mothers of various nations could meet, there would be no more wars.” (Forster 72)

Her upbringing, typical of the 19th century, prepared her only to fulfill her destiny as wife and mother. Ruth lacks any significant education or awareness of world issues, yet she is entirely content with her lot. It is these exact characteristics that grant her so fond a place in Henry’s memory after her death. He sees Ruth’s placid constancy—her “unvarying virtue”—as “a woman’s noblest quality” (Forster 71). Of the three woman, she is the most apt to receive Henry’s approval, if not his respect.

Ruth represents the older Victorian values of the upper-middle class. As Henry typifies the stereotype for men, so Ruth embodies the mild-mannered, virtuous housewife whose concerns extend only to the home and family. Even concerning her most passionate interest, Howards End (the only thing she possesses not granted to her by her husband), she allows Henry to manage the property as he sees fit. His sweeping changes to the estate—including selling off livestock, remodeling the buildings, and adding a garage (Forster 163)—may cause her no small amount of dismay, yet she never protests. Having lived her entire life according to the ascribed standards for decent female behavior, Ruth lacks the means or desire to break out of her role, even when her childhood home is at stake.

In direct contrast to demure Ruth lies the gauche, socially inept Jacky Bast. Distinctly less fortunate than Ruth or Margaret, Jacky Bast’s plight demonstrates the consequences of gender inequality. She also “combines the themes of class and sex: she is oppressed by both, for she belongs to the class society calls ‘lower’ and the sex it considers inferior” (Finkelstein 96). If Ruth represents the best position an Edwardian woman can obtain while still complying with gender standards, Jacky represents the worst.

A woman in Jacky’s position—poor, ignorant of social refinements, and entirely uneducated—had few means of improving her life. Formal education was impossible, even supposing one had money: the two principal universities of England, Oxford and Cambridge, “stubbornly refused to grant women degrees until the 1920s” (Stearns 52). A career in the theatre or other professions depended largely on talent and luck, neither of which Jacky possessed, being both “shy” and “bestially stupid” (Forster 178). Her viable options are thus narrowed down to two: marriage or the factories. Desiring neither a crippling work schedule nor debilitating health problems, Jacky sensibly opts for the former course, which leads to her disastrous relationship with Henry.
Jacky latches onto Henry for the same reason she later attaches herself to Leonard Bast: she believes that a man’s protection is the key to her salvation. This line of thinking is another gender stereotype which has existed time out of mind and persists even today. Men are expected to be chivalrous, women to be grateful and biddable. However, in pursuing Henry, Jacky fails to take into account the double-standard regarding sexual profligacy: in men, it is expected, even encouraged, but women must never, ever behave unchastely.

At the time of their association, Henry is contentedly married; he has no qualms about indulging in a casual affair, but he has no intention of “rescuing” one whom he sees as a woman of loose virtue. Ironically, by becoming Henry’s mistress, Jacky loses whatever respect she might otherwise have been able to cultivate. She becomes a fallen woman, whose grim future Forster predicts can only end badly: “They [fallen women] end in two ways: Either they sink till the lunatic asylums and the workhouses are full of them […], or else they entrap a boy into marriage before it is too late” (Forster 200). By the time Jacky realizes how badly the affair has sabotaged her already-limited prospects, it is too late. She has no education, no husband, and now, no respectability. Jacky Bast, through her relationship with Henry, fails to live up to society’s rigid set of gender expectations, and so becomes a social embarrassment, an object of pity or disgust to the other characters, the reader, and even apparently to Forster himself. Of all the characters in the book (excepting Leonard Bast), Jacky is perhaps the greatest victim of her time period.

Finally, one must consider Margaret Schlegel, who, unlike Ruth and Jacky, refuses to fall in line with prescribed gender mandates. Her modern, progressive mindset is partly the result of her “unique upbringing” (Finkelstein 93), partly the result of belonging to a younger generation than that of Ruth or Jacky. Her parents’ deaths force Margaret at a young age to become a surrogate parent for both her siblings, not to mention taking on the financial and social responsibilities of the household. At twenty-nine years old, she considers herself quite worldly: “She had kept house for over ten years; she had entertained, almost with distinction; she had brought up a charming sister, and was bringing up a brother. Surely, if experience is attainable, she had attained it” (Forster 59). Too, her education was more progressive than Ruth’s, being unburdened by Victorian stodginess. Her knowledge of literature, art, and culture is much broader than the first Mrs. Wilcox’s; from her education, she has developed a quick mind and her own set of ideas, many of which (notably woman’s suffrage and socialism) are decidedly progressive for a middle-class Edwardian woman.

This is not to say that Margaret is anachronistically radical; for although she is comfortable espousing progressive ideals in the abstract, in her own life, she tends to instinctively fall back on “acceptable” feminine behavior.
der limitations are most visible in her relationship with Henry. One would never suspect the progressive, shrewd Margaret Schlegel, “the primary hero” of the novel, to fall for the boorish Henry Wilcox (Finkelstein 90). She is driven to accept his marriage proposal partly out of mutual friendship, but mostly because her present circumstances have spawned intense feelings of vulnerability, and Henry offers an easy exit to her problems. His proposal is certainly timely: frustrated by weeks of fruitless house-hunting after the Schlegels’ lease has expired, Margaret feels pressured by the responsibility of providing a home not just for herself, but for her family, as well. Her biological clock is also ticking: “She was not young or very rich, and it amazed her that a man of any standing should take her seriously” (Forster 131). These factors, coming at point when her future seems so uncertain, combined with Henry’s apparent “commercial efficiency in dealing with trouble of the outer world” convince Margaret that marrying Henry is an attractive solution (Thomson 127).

Moreover, although the notion of “a feminist Margaret in love with an antifeminist Henry” seems unlikely, they get on surprisingly well together (Finkelstein 105). Although she admits that she does not love him (Forster 137), she does “like being with him. He was not a rebuke, but a stimulus, and banished morbidity. Some twenty years her senior, he preserved a gift that she supposed herself to have already lost—not youth’s creative power, but its self-confidence and optimism” (Forster 128). Their friendship adapts into a romantic rapport which, if not passionate, is at least amiable.

Their “marriage runs smoothly for a time”; however, the relationship is “entirely on Henry’s terms” (Finkelstein 109). Under his influence, Margaret begins to adopt a more traditional role, that of the submissive housewife which Ruth fulfilled so well. She begins acquiescing without argument: “as for the first Mrs. Wilcox, her husband’s wishes take precedence over Margaret’s” (Dougherty 3). When she discovers Henry’s affair with Jacky, she forgives him easily, “for it was not her tragedy: it was Mrs. Wilcox’s” (Forster 184). The old Margaret Schlegel might have balked at this revelation, but Margaret Wilcox accepts his infidelity calmly. When the crisis of Helen’s unwedded pregnancy rears its head, rather than confront the situation herself, Margaret turns to Henry as “the only hope. Henry was definite. He might know some paths in the chaos that were hidden from them, and she determined to […] lay the whole matter in his hands” (Forster 222). This last step, however, proves to be a mistake.

By trusting Henry’s judgment rather than her own, Margaret unwittingly endangers the person she cherishes most in the world: her sister Helen. Henry’s response to the news of Helen’s condition is typically officious and mercenary: have her proclaimed mentally unstable and shuttle her off to an asylum, where she would be unable to inflict further damage to the Wilcox family name. His selfish presumption infuriates Margaret, as does his hypocritical refusal to
equate Helen’s romantic indiscretion with his own. His appalling behavior finally opens her eyes to her husband’s faults, and her resulting rage resurrects her spirit of independence. For the first time in her marriage, she breaks out of her gender role and defies her husband:

You shall see the connection if it kills you, Henry! You have had a mistress—I forgave you. My sister has a lover—you drive her from the house. Do you see the connection? Stupid, hypocritical, cruel—oh, contemptible!—a man who insults his wife when she’s alive and cants with her memory when she’s dead. A man who ruins a woman for his pleasure, and casts her off to ruin other man. And gives bad financial advice, and then says he is not responsible. These, man, are you. (Forster 244)

This speech marks a turning point in the novel, as well as for Margaret. Not only does she stand up against her husband (anathema to Edwardian women); she also pits her modern sensibilities against Henry’s insistence on tradition and gender double-standards. And she wins.

Ultimately, Margaret succeeds where Ruth and Jacky failed: she uses her own standards, rather than those society has allotted her, to triumph over Henry’s unfair ruling—and by extension, over the gender injustices of her time. After the fallout from the argument and the evens following—Leonard’s death, Charles conviction, Helen’s child born—it is Henry, not Margaret, who crumbles in the face of adversity: his “fortress gave way. He could bear no one but his wife, he shambled up to Margaret afterwards and asked her to do what she could with him” (Forster 264). Her response is to re-establish peace among the Wilcox and Schlegel families, restore Howards End to its former glory (having inherited it from her husband), and rebuild her marriage—on a more equal footing, this time.

All three women represent important aspects of female Edwardian society. Ruth follows expectations without question or criticism and is content. Jacky attempts to comply with society’s grossly unfair standards, and fails. Only Margaret finds a medium between her expected role (respectable wife) and modern feminism—her progressive principles which ultimately prove more enduring than the unequal ways of the past. Together, the three form a realistic portrayal of the expectations, limitations, and standards which dictated the lives of Edwardian women.
Works Cited


Endnotes

1. A note on Helen: she is excluded because her primary relationship is with Leonard, not Henry. Helen’s degree of feminist sensibility may be an important issue in the novel, but it lies outside the scope of this paper.