

The Belle's Stratagem

Hannah Cowley, 1780

Hannah the Woman:

According to a preface in a set of her collected works, Cowley's first play came about after she and her husband, Thomas Cowley, went to the theatre. While sitting in the audience, she turned to Thomas and exclaimed, "Why, I could write as well myself!" Her husband laughed, but the next day she sketched out the first act to her first show *The Runaway*.

Cowley's feminist tendencies make themselves known in her work. Though there are more male characters than female characters in the play, Cowley centers *The Belle's Stratagem* around women who embody a desire, much like Cowley's, to do as they wish. The women in this show are multifaceted and clever. They share a mindset which allows for a woman to exist without the necessity of a man. Through these characters, Cowley manages to create a feminist text years ahead of her time.

Cowley's Characters:

The subversion of both the gender divide and the expectations of baseness due to provincialism that surround the relationship between Doricourt and Letitia acts as the catalyst to propel *The Belle's Stratagem* forward. The two move through traditional expectations of female behavior and assumption-based prejudices to develop their relationship throughout the play.

Letitia and Doricourt cannot wade through these expectations alone, however, and rely on their fellow characters to direct them along their respective paths. These characters shape the story, while Letitia and Doricourt provide the plot line for the others to shape. Through cunning and wit, utilization of stereotype and distraction, and a lot of masks, Cowley's characters create a socially challenging story which asks the audience if expectation and bias have any power when it comes to matters of the heart.

Industrialism and the World-class:

Born in Devonshire, England in 1743, Hannah Cowley entered the world at a time of great change. 18th century England was transforming at a rapid pace; by the end of the 18th century, the industrial revolution had begun.

The industrial revolution meant a major shift in technological prowess, which caused a ripple effect that meant higher standards of living, higher wages, a population boost, and much more ease of travel due to new roads, better fuel, and better vehicles — like the steam engine. Those who had the means could now see more of the world faster than had ever been possible. There was room for a new kind of world-class citizen.

Cowley explores these new opportunities and their societal effects through her characters in *The Belle's Stratagem*. The relationship between Letitia and Doricourt plays off of the inherent differences between these two kinds of people, utilizing stereotype, expectation, and bias to drive the story. There is a tension between Letitia and Doricourt caused by Doricourt's disapproval of those who remain in their homes instead of experiencing what the world holds. He creates his own expectations and stereotypes which he places upon Letitia, judging her immediately based on these personal prejudices alone. Cowley doesn't let Letitia live up to these base expectations, and makes a point to subvert stereotype with her writing, consistently providing opportunities for her characters to act in ways that their images may not initially suggest.

