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Portrayal of Gender in Henry Fielding's Amelia : A Reconsideration

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Henry Fielding, the eighteenth century English novelist, has been thought by critics to reveal a 'male' outlook in his novels. Fielding studies have highlighted the horseplay and the robustness of his novels but have failed to recognise the gender issues prevalent in the works. On analysis of his works it will be found that an active debate on the social position of women, about sexual difference and gender roles in eighteenth century society forms a major theme running through the whole of Henry Fielding's work. This paper will attempt to relate the characters and incidents in Henry Fielding's last novel *Amelia* (1751) to the gender issues prevalent in eighteenth century England. It will try to show that while Fielding in *Amelia* seems mostly to conform to the conventional views of the eighteenth century; in many cases he challenges these traditional views of gender.

The period from the Restoration to the mid- eighteenth century in England witnessed a number of satires against women. The context of these anti feminist satires created a myth of negative assumptions about women. Women in Pope's satires exhibit characteristics of inconstancy, pride and self-love. Edward Young used familiar examples of undesirable women like the learned lady, the prude, and the affected devout to insist that the ideal woman is chaste, obedient, and also fragile and requires patriarchal protection. In the literature of the age, women were often portrayed as stereotypes. The narrator in Fielding's last novel *Amelia* makes certain generalisations regarding women which betray the patriarchal conditioning which was prevalent in eighteenth century England. Some women characters in the novel are envisaged as types rather than individuals in their own right. The type of the superannuated immoral widow found in Restoration plays seems to have influenced the creation of Mrs

Ellison² and the type of the scheming widow is found in the portrayal of Mrs Bennet's step-mother.³ The patriarchal notion that a woman past her prime must be necessarily jealous of youth and beauty is found in *Amelia* when Mrs Bennet tells Amelia that her aunt had been envious of her knowledge of Latin, which had made her, according to her aunt, a "conceited fool", and "a downright coxcomb".⁴ The idea that women are jealous of each other for petty reasons is another patriarchal idea. Thus Miss Mathews finds "the continual praises" of her sister extremely "nauseous" and states that "no woman can bear any superiority in whatever thing she desires to excel in.,"⁵ and that "women do not love to hear one another's praises."⁶ Although Miss Mathews is a negative character in the novel, the narrator himself agrees with these misogynistic generalisations of Miss Mathews when he states that "beauty in general doth not greatly recommend one woman to another".⁷

The patriarchal notion that women can sow the seed of discord among men and make bitter enemies out of friends is also found in the novel. Thus Colonel James falls in love with Amelia and she unknowingly makes him an enemy of Booth. The narrator goes on to quote from Vanbrugh lines which puts the entire blame on the woman totally ignoring Amelia's innocence and goodness:

Friendship, take heed; if woman interfere,

Be sure the hour of thy destruction's near.8

Earlier in the novel, the relationship between Booth and Colonel James is shown to be disrupted through the machinations of the vengeful Miss Mathews.⁹ Apart from Miss Mathews, several other characters in the novel express sentiments that are detrimental to women. Mrs Ellison thinks that "the greatest pleasure of woman-kind" lies in the admiration of men.¹⁰ Even the benevolent Dr Harrison states that "the knowledge that they are in the wrong, is a very strong reason to some women to continue so."¹¹

Women in patriarchal literature were regarded as good or evil, as vehicles of salvation and destruction for the male hero. Booth, Amelia's husband, thinks Amelia is an "angel in a human form" and Amelia is contrasted with Miss Mathews whose sexual vitality is portrayed as a form of aggressiveness. Miss Mathews thus is guilty of violating the patriarchal order and is denied happiness by the novelist.

There was acute discomfort felt with the idea of the learned woman throughout the eighteenth century. Capable of corrupting other women with her ideas, the learned woman became a pervasive metaphor for the unnatural woman who refused to perform the natural functions of her sex and who actively usurped the function of the male sex. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu in a letter to her daughter, the Countess of Bute written on 28th January, 1753 regarding her granddaughter's education advised that the little girl should conceal whatever

learning she acquired "with as much solicitude as she would hide crookedness or lameness" as her learning would arouse hatred and envy in "all he and she fools." 13 In Amelia, Dr Harrison who is an ideal figure in the novel categorises learning as a "masculine" trait 14 and looks down on Mrs Atkinson's literary skills and her knowledge of Latin. We are shown that Mrs Atkinson's excessive learning leads to a condescension towards her humble husband and thus to a reversal of the accepted order of supremacy. Jill Campbell has said that Mrs Atkinson's intellect is felt as a "threatening" force by her husband. 15

In Restoration and eighteenth century conduct books, moral essays, sermons, biographies and poems directed at a predominantly female audience, the perfect woman is even-tempered, patient, modest and prudent. All the social institutions supported the interpretation of woman's role as voiced by Richard Steele in *The Spectator*: "All she has to do in this World, is contained within the Duties of a Daughter, a Sister, a Wife, and a Mother" and to realize this is "for their own Happiness and Comfort, as well as that of those for whom they were born." In texts such as George Savile, the Marquis of Halifax's The Lady's New-Year's Gift: or, Advice to a Daughter, a work which is literally and figuratively patriarchal in its endorsement of female subordination, young women are taught to value 'natural' femininity -silence, submission and abstinence- and are offered an illusion of power based on sublimation and passive virtue.¹⁷ Fielding's Amelia is in many ways the ideal woman of the eighteenth century and is praised by the narrator for her "sweetness, softness, innocence, modesty". 18 Fielding uses Amelia explicitly to defend such things as motherhood, love, marriage, goodness and generosity. Amelia has been described as being "full of care and tenderness" and has the most "impregnable virtue". 20 She is a mistress of cooking as she was of every "economical" office and she takes pleasure in instructing her children in religion and morality and the narrator says that in spite of Amelia's many admirable qualities, he doubts "whether it be possible to view this fine creature in a more amiable light, than while she was dressing her husband's supper with her little children playing round her."21 Dr Harrison tells Booth he should be happy "in having a wife that hath the discretion" to prefer her home to "scenes of riot, disorder, and intemperance, very improper to be frequented by a chaste and sober Christian matron."22

The conduct books of the period stressed that the duties of a wife to a husband were no less than love, fidelity and obedience to all his lawful desires and prudent counsels. Amelia expresses her willingness to do what her husband "commands her"²³ and "do the duty of a wife, and that is to attend her husband wherever he goes".²⁴ When Booth arrives home for dinner, bringing Colonel James with him without prior notice, Amelia shows

none of that paultry pride, which possesses so many of her sex, and which

disconcerts their tempers, and gives them the air and looks of furies, if their

husbands bring in an unexpected guest, without giving them timely warning

to provide a sacrifice to their own vanity.²⁵

In *Advice to a Daughter*, Halifax states that a wife through her "Gentleness" is meant "to soften, and to entertain" her husband.²⁶ Amelia's behaviour as a wife appears true to the ideal model constructed in the conduct-books. Amelia demonstrates actively that it is a wife's duty to complement her husband's nature and situation, to comfort and console him, and compensate him for all his major and minor problems through her own efforts even when these distresses are of his own making. When Booth is depressed, she tries not to "aggravate it", and does her best "to conceal her own fears, and to quiet those of her husband."²⁷ She repeatedly ignores her own feelings and needs, giving her entire attention to comforting her husband. Thus we find that Amelia finding Booth unable to go to sleep, "likewise bid adieu to her slumbers, and attempted to entertain him with her conversation".²⁸ She nurses Booth in his sickbed and although she herself contracts an illness, it is "not without difficulty" that she is made to leave his bedside.²⁹ Amelia's model behaviour is used by Fielding to criticise by contrast the distorted examples of wifely selfishness assimilated by young ladies of fashion from the current social customs of their class. Notwithstanding this note of satire, we feel here that Fielding's portrayal of the virtues of Amelia as a wife is extremely conformist.

Halifax makes it quite clear that it is the wife's duty in a marriage to accommodate every moral weakness of a bad husband like avarice, drunkenness and adultery by exerting her own moral strength as well as her ingenuity to make the best of things.³⁰ Thus Amelia does not upbraid Booth for coming home late in a slightly drunken condition and instead welcomes him with an embrace.³¹ Later when Booth is in a tremendous passion, Amelia does not show any reciprocal anger but tells him that she will explain everything to him only when he is "cool" again and has regained his "calm", and "not before".³² When Booth wastes the money she had obtained by pawning all her valuables, Amelia in spite of their impoverished condition, does not upbraid him as she thinks that he is "the better judge"³³ and she is wiling to submit to his "superior judgment"³⁴The ideal wife was expected to graciously overlook adultery in her husband. Thus Amelia does not indulge in lengthy recriminations towards her husband when he ultimately confesses his adultery with Miss Mathews. Amelia tells Booth that she had known about his affair and had forgiven him a long time before. Thus Amelia's complete forgiveness of Booth seems to be set down by Fielding without any examination or explanation as an automatic response of the ideal and model wife as given in the conduct books.

Throughout the second half of the seventeenth century, it is remarkable that three hundred to four hundred women published articles in response to the antifeminist diatribes by men. In 1688, Jane Barker introduced two feminist themes into her first volume of poetry- the desirability of the single life and close female friendship. From the mid 1680s until about 1713, an unprecedented number of women wrote on women's conditions of whom Mary Astell was the best known.³⁵ The tradition of rationalist feminism which flourished at this time concentrated on arguing the right of women to be regarded as men's equals in only one main respect, that is, in the possessing of equal rational and moral potential. Critiques of standards in the education of girls accompanied this. Sarah Fyge published a volume of poems in which she attacked marriage and male power, applauded liberty and advocated female education. Mary Astell fiercely argues in A Serious Proposal to the Ladies (1694), that woman has equal capacity with man and was not created to serve him and Lady Mary Chudleigh in "To the Ladies" (1703), urges women to shun the "wretched" state of marriage and value themselves by despising men. Nearly all the women writers praised female friendship as a haven of security, and a means of resisting patriarchy.³⁶ Some very radical pamphlets were published in 1739 and 1740 by "Sophia, a Person of Quality", an anonymous follower of Mary Astell who argues that there is no logical reason why women should not be considered worthy of holding positions of public responsibility, filling university chairs or even commanding armies, and she writes radically about male "prejudice", "usurpation" and "tyranny". 37 Fielding's cousin Lady Mary Wortley Montagu anonymously launched her own political paper *The Nonsense of Common-Sense* (1737-38) where she attacks the husband who expects blind obedience from his wife and who refuses to credit any reason to women. A brilliant intellectual who loved learning, Montagu concluded that women had a right to solid education.³⁸ Contemporary women novelists created situations in their novels that criticise the attitudes of society toward women and the treatment of women. Both Charlotte Lennox's and Elizabeth Inchbald's heroines are very different from the insipid model of feminine propriety. Both Sarah Fielding and Eliza Haywood called in different ways for a reconsideration of female education in their novels.³⁹

It is thus beyond doubt that Fielding throughout his career found himself engaging with a society enlivened by the discussion of women's issues. In *Amelia* we will find that at times Fielding felt an essential sympathy with the arguments used by feminists in the eighteenth century.

The problems of the married woman, the issue of her sacrifice of a legal existence separate from her husband's recurs in *Amelia*, a novel partly devoted to exploring the bases for the conduct of a married woman. The problem is raised by Amelia's malicious unmarried sister Betty Harris as a kind of taunt. Displeased with both Amelia and

Booth on account of their marriage and of behaviour which she states actually caused the death of her mother; she pretends to place the majority of the blame upon Booth, since "it was not easy to know how far a woman is in the power of her husband". The issue of the deference of a wife to her husband in a marriage is an important one in *Amelia*. It is reflected in each of the several marriages portrayed in the novel. The problem is reflected in an entertaining way when Mrs Atkinson finds it difficult to obey a husband less educated and learned than herself. Mrs James invokes the concept of the "obedient wife" with mock piety when she reminds her husband that she had complied with his instructions and had cooperated in a diabolical scheme deferring not merely to unreasonableness in Colonel James but to downright criminality. ⁴¹

Fielding in *Amelia* often shows his awareness of the complexities involved in wifely obedience. He makes Amelia express resentment at being treated "like a child" by her husband when he refuses to explain why he would not let her accept tickets to go to a masquerade. ⁴². Amelia falters in her loyalty to her husband when Booth has been arrested for the final time and she believes, thanks to a letter from Colonel James, that her husband is deceiving her again with Miss Mathews. In her agony she cries out to her little boy's question about his father: "Mention him no more. Your papa is- indeed he is a wicked man- he cares not for any of us." She registers disapproval of her husband's views and would like to convince him that "there are really such things as religion and virtue." Fielding wants to make the reader understand that the cultural myth of the perfectly obedient domestic woman was extremely unreasonable.

Ideas such as the acceptance of the authority of the husband, and of the separate spheres of activity of husband and wife are discussed and consciously departed from in the relationship between Booth and Amelia in Fielding's last novel. The marriage of Amelia and Booth, Fielding suggests, is based to a large extent on friendship. Friendship, as has been seen in his earlier novels, is important in Fielding for its power to transcend distinctions of class and of sex, in the recognition of someone else's essential worth as a human being. In *Amelia*, Amelia's devotion to Booth enshrines true friendship and is to be contrasted with the friendless and treacherous marriages and other personal relationships in the novel. The narrator in speaking of the 'heroic tenderness' with which Amelia cares after her husband is praising not so much her wifely duties as her capacity for the highest friendship.⁴⁵ Amelia assures Booth that

however other friends may prove false and fickle to him, he hath one

friend, whom no inconstancy of her own, nor any change of his fortune,

nor time, nor age, nor sickness, nor any accident can ever alter; but who,

will esteem, will love, and doat on him for ever. 40

Thus Fielding's portrayal of Amelia reveals self-sacrifice not only because she is a wife but also because it enshrines the values of friendship which Fielding thinks should extend to human relationships of all kinds throughout society. The idea that the marriage of Booth and Amelia is based on friendship is strengthened as the novel progresses. Booth does not presume to be superior to Amelia and asks for Amelia's advice on various matters which include matters of finance.⁴⁷ In the process, Amelia's moral strength and determination of mind also becomes apparent. When Trent to whom Booth owes money demands payment, Booth determines "to acquaint his wife with the whole affair" and to "ask her advice" about the proper action to be taken. Amelia as a friend and partner advises Booth to repay the money as soon as possible.⁴⁸ Thus here we find a sharing of experience and problems between husband and wife not envisaged by Halifax. Thus although Amelia may seem to display much of the ideal wifely behaviour described by Halifax, Fielding also shows her diverging significantly from the prevailing social model. Halifax implies that the wife who complies in ideal gentleness with the inferior understanding or defective temper of a husband can gain the upper hand in the marital relationship and use it in her favour. Fielding however is against any power-seeking by either partner in a marriage. This is a major distinction in the thinking of Halifax and Fielding. Amelia never regards her husband's weaknesses as opportunities for self advancement. The inexhaustible generosity of Amelia's responses to Booth therefore is evidence not of wifely subservience but of true friendship.

Fielding shows that Amelia in many aspects is superior to her husband. She has a wonderful sense of humour, excellent presence of mind and can judge character better than her husband. Thus Fielding does not adhere to the notion that intelligence is only a male prerogative. He supports the idea that women are capable of the highest intelligence. Mrs Atkinson denounces as "nonsensical" the "opinion that the difference of sexes causes any difference in the mind", and Dr Harrison who has doubts regarding the desirability of learning in women, goes so far as to confirm that he does not question their intellectual ability to achieve it.⁴⁹ Amelia is highly intelligent⁵⁰ and is quick to perceive "the disturbance" in Booth's mind "tho' he endeavoured with his utmost power to hide it."⁵¹ The novel goes on to prove that she definitely does not lack presence of mind and in a moment of crisis, does not throw hysterics.⁵²

It would be incorrect to conclude that Fielding has assembled the character of Amelia entirely out of conventional manners and socially conformist ideals. The virtues regarded as feminine by patriarchal society are challenged by Fielding when he makes Amelia disregard the convention of female modesty. She sets it aside pointedly and does not apologise for speaking at unwomanly length on the merits of Serjeant Atkinson:

I positively will not spoil his fortune by my silence. I can answer for him from his infancy, that he was one of the best natured lads in the world. I will tell you a story or two of him, the truth of which I can testify from my own knowledge. When he was six years old...⁵³

Amelia also is not hesitant about reminding her husband that in spite of her weaker judgement of matters, she has "sometimes had the happiness of luckily hitting on some argument" which had been beneficial to Booth. ⁵⁴ As the novel proceeds, the reader himself is completely convinced of Amelia's moral and intellectual independence and the fact that she is a source of strength to Booth rather than the other way about.

Often Amelia's reactions go beyond what was expected of her sex by the patriarchal society of the time. The idea that Amelia is morally completely independent is adequately demonstrated when she greets Miss Mathews who is in prison. Miss Mathews is surprised to find that Amelia does not show her the "insults, of which virtuous women are generally so liberal to a frail sister." The narrator points out that:

Her virtue could support itself with its own intrinsic worth, without borrowing any assistance from the vices of other women; and she considered their natural infirmities as the objects of pity, not of contempt or abhorrence.⁵⁵

When Amelia could not convince her husband that she should not go to a masquerade, she and Mrs Atkinson together successfully conspire against and outwit the male characters in the novel.⁵⁶ Thus we have here an example of Fielding's women coming together to resist the patriarchal dictates of society.

In *Amelia*, the behaviour of male characters sometimes does not conform to what was expected of their gender. Both Booth and Major Bath act as nurse to the female characters. While Major Bath is ashamed to confess this as he thinks it unmanly, Booth thinks that "when the creature one loves—is undergoing the most racking torments", caring for her is more honourable than other 'manly' activities.⁵⁷

We find that in his last novel Fielding has gone beyond the stereotypical characterisation of women characters that was prevalent in the literature of the time. At first Mrs. Bennet appears as a docile and passive woman, prematurely aged by an unfortunate experience and thus she evokes our pity. Our response is somewhat modified by her next appearance, as a gay, good-humoured woman who speaks against second marriages with grace and

learning. Her long autobiography further complicates her assessment. Although she seems to be the victim of an unkind fortune and a cruel world, several questions arise about her integrity and complicity in her own undoing. Yet she is not presented as a villainous or evil person and remains kind and helpful to the last. She embodies both good and evil and we can see them battling in her. We see her ambition and selfishness but we are also made aware of her warm and good nature. Mrs Bennet is one of the most morally complex figures in Fielding's novels.

Perhaps the greatest proof that in *Amelia* Fielding has dared to think beyond the patriarchal ideology accepted in his time is that Mrs Bennet despite being 'ruined' is allowed to live a happy life. Chastity, narrowly-defined, was the all-important factor in determining how a woman was valued by others and by herself in the eighteenth century. It was equated with virtue or honour in women and once lost, it was assumed to be irrecoverable. Mrs Bennet recovers from the catastrophe in her life and is allowed to rebuild her life and marry again and for a respectable woman of the eighteenth century this was unheard of. Fielding in his address to Ralph Allen at the beginning of *Amelia* makes his didactic intention in the novel clear. The novel was "designed to promote the cause of virtue----"58Possibly Fielding equates virtue here with intrinsic qualities rather than technical chastity.

Fielding has been described by critics as a 'male' novelist and in many ways *Amelia* reinforces the dominant patriarchal ideology of the eighteenth century. At the same time we may say that the novel espouses a liberal feminism which believes in the essential equality of the sexes and thus in many ways undermines contemporary patriarchal ideology.

NOTES

¹ See Felicity A. Nussbaum, *The Brink of All We Hate: English Satires on Women 1660-1750* (Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1984) pp.1-2.

¹³ A. R. Humphreys, "The 'Rights of Woman' in the Age of Reason", *Modern Language Review*, Vol. 41, 1946, pp.260-261.

¹⁵ Jill Campbell, *Natural Masques: Gender and Identity in Fielding's Plays and Novels* (Stanford University Press, 1995) p. 209.

¹⁶ Richard Steele, *The Spectator*, quoted in Katherine M. Rogers, *Feminism in Eighteenth Century England* (Sussex: The Harvester Press Ltd., 1982) p.7

¹⁷ Rousseau, in his *Emile*, as quoted by Mary Wollstonecraft in her landmark *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* lays stress on good nature, meekness and docility for women. Steele in the *Tatler* (No. 175), emphasised modesty for women and the idea that women should be ever ready to amuse, soothe and elevate the tempers of men.

² Henry Fielding, *Amelia* 1751 (London: Penguin Books Ltd; 1987) Bk. V, ch. ii; p.196.

³ Ibid, Bk. VII, ch. ii; p. 274.

⁴ Ibid, Bk. VII, ch. iv; p. 284.

⁵ Ibid, Bk. I, ch. vii; p. 40.

⁶ Ibid, Bk. II, ch. vii; p. 83.

⁷ Ibid, Bk. IV, ch. vii; p. 180.

⁸ Ibid, Bk. VIII, ch. viii; p. 343.

⁹ Ibid, Bk. IV, ch. viii; p. 181-182.

¹⁰ Ibid, Bk. IV, ch. ix; p. 185.

¹¹ Ibid. Bk. IX, ch.iv; p.378.

¹² Ibid. Bk. X, ch. vi; p.440.

¹⁴ Fielding, Amelia Bk. X ch. iv; p. 432.

Also see Sir Walter Raleigh ed., *Complete Works of George Savile, First Marqess of Halifax* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1912)

- ¹⁸ Fielding, *Amelia* Bk. II, ch. ii; p.62
- ¹⁹ Ibid. Bk. III, ch. vi; p. 113.
- ²⁰ Ibid. Bk III, ch. ix; p. 128.
- ²¹ Ibid, Bk. XI, ch. viii; p. 496.
- ²² Ibid, Bk. X, ch. iv; p. 428.
- ²³ Ibid. Bk. IX, ch. ii; pp. 367-368
- ²⁴ Ibid. ch. iv; p. 376.
- ²⁵ Ibid, Bk. IV, ch. iv; p. 162.
- ²⁶Raleigh, p.8
- ²⁷Fielding, *Amelia* Bk. VI, ch. vii; p. 255, ch. ix; p. 261, Bk. IX, ch. ix; p. 404.
- ²⁸Ibid, Bk. VI, ch. ii; p. 234.
- ²⁹Ibid, Bk. III, ch. vii; p. 114.
- ³⁰Raleigh, pp. 10-15.
- ³¹Fielding, Bk. X, ch. v; pp. 439-440.
- ³² Ibid, Bk. X, ch. vi; pp. 442-443.
- ³³ Ibid. Bk. XI, ch. v; p. 483.
- ³⁴ Ibid. p.486.
- ³⁵ Nussbaum, pp.15-43.
- ³⁶ Moira Ferguson, *First Feminists*, *British Women Writers* 1578-1799 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985) pp. 15-20.
- ³⁷ The pamphlets by 'Sophia' are *Woman not Inferior to Man....by Sophia a Person of Quality* (London, 1739) and *Woman's Superior Excellence over Man; Or, A Reply to Man Superior to Woman...By Sophia, a Person of Quality, Author of 'Woman not Inferior to Man'* (London, 1740)
- ³⁸ Katherine M. Rogers, *Feminism in Eighteenth Century England* (Sussex: The Harvester Press Ltd., 1982) pp.94-95.

- ³⁹ Ibid, p.111.
- ⁴⁰ Fielding, *Amelia* Bk. III, ch. xi; pp. 137-138.
- ⁴¹ Ibid, Bk. XI, ch. i; p. 462.
- ⁴² Ibid, Bk. VI, ch. vi; p.250.
- ⁴³ Ibid, Bk. XI, ch. ix; p.500.
- 44 Ibid, Bk. X, ch. ix; p.458.
- ⁴⁵ Ibid, B. IV, ch. ii; p. 158.
- ⁴⁶ Ibid. ch. v; p. 170.
- ⁴⁷ Ibid, Bk. VI, ch. v; p. 249.
- ⁴⁸ Ibid, Bk. XI, ch. iv; p. 479.
- ⁴⁹ Ibid, Bk. X, ch. iv; p. 433; ch. i; p. 412.
- ⁵⁰ Ibid, Bk. IX, ch. vi; p.389.
- ⁵¹ Ibid, Bk. IV, ch. v; p. 169.
- ⁵² Ibid, Bk. IX, ch. vi; p. 385.
- ⁵³ Ibid, Bk. V, ch. iii; pp. 197-198.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid, Bk. IV, ch. vi; p. 174.
- ⁵⁵ Ibid, Bk. IV, ch. ii; p. 154.
- ⁵⁶ Ibid, Bk. X, ch. iii; pp. 425, 426.
- ⁵⁷ Ibid, Bk. III, ch. viii; p.123.
- ⁵⁸ Ibid. p.3.



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