

# Time Management and Autonomous Subjectivity: Catherine Talbot, Politeness, and Self-Discipline as a Practice of Freedom

Soile Ylivuori

Queen Mary University of London (<[s.ylivuori@qmul.ac.uk](mailto:s.ylivuori@qmul.ac.uk)>)

## *Abstract*

The article investigates the moralist author and bluestocking Catherine Talbot's (1721-1770) system of time management and self-discipline through her manuscript journals. Her writings paint a picture of a woman who, by monitoring her daily activities by the minute, aimed at making the most of her time in a very concrete way. More specifically, Talbot's time management was an integral part of her regime of self-imposed discipline, aimed at moral and polite self-improvement and rational selfhood. Moreover, the article argues that Talbot's quest for self-control can be seen as an attempt to formulate autonomous subjectivity within the framework of the culture of politeness and to gain pleasure through working on the self. Self-discipline could also be a means of acquiring freedom from normative gender roles in an environment where discipline was seen as a masculine prerogative.

*Keywords:* Eighteenth-Century Women, Gender Identity, Self-Discipline, Subjectivity, Time Management

## 1. *Introduction*

In November 1753, the moralist author and bluestocking Catherine Talbot (1721-1770) wrote in her journal:

Tuesday Nov<sup>r</sup> 6 [1753]. Up at 7 ½ – it should be earlier if I did not drink Asses milk. The time past much as usual til 11 ¼. We then took an Airing till 1 ... Reading & Writing 1 ¼, Dressing I am ashamed to say it, ¾ filled up the time till 3.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Journals of Catherine Talbot (henceforth *JCT*), 6 November 1753, BL Add. MS 46688, f. 20.



Another entry from the same month:

Wednesday Nov<sup>r</sup> 28 [1753] ... the good D<sup>s</sup> knocked at my Door, & after  $\frac{1}{4}$  running up & down all the stair cases I could find by way of Exercise, I went & read with her in her Closet Sir Ch[arles Grandison]: till 1  $\frac{1}{2}$  ... Then went into the Drawing Room, & while I walked for near  $\frac{3}{4}$  read the Psalms for the Day, mused on some of my own Faults. (*JCT*, 28 November 1753, BL Add. MS 46688, f. 28)

Such meticulous records of her daily doings, often keeping track of her activities every quarter of an hour, are quite common in Catherine Talbot's journals from the 1750s, when she was in her thirties. She started her account of every day by noting the time she woke up – mostly between 5 and 7 o'clock – and continued to jot down her activities to a high level of precision. Talbot seems to have been obsessed with self-monitoring herself and her time management, and every half an hour spent in idleness and frivolity led to serious self-flagellation. In 1751, she wrote: 'Oh that I Could but find Myself Improved. There was [a] great need of it, & is as much as there was. Indolence [&] Laziness are my most Formidable Enemies now. How many weeks have they made me lose in meer minutes!' (*JCT*, 31 December 1751, BL Add. MS 46690, f. 45).

This article examines this curious, almost obsessive time management Talbot was engaged in, and offers some interpretations of her motivation behind this severe regime of self-control. My argument will be that Talbot was committed to a rationalist and moralist plan of personal self-perfection, not only aimed at developing her practical skills in everyday polite feminine employment, but also tying her to the Enlightenment project of rational subjectivity. Moreover, through engaging in what Michel Foucault calls ethical work on one's self, Talbot was able to build an autonomous feeling of identity and selfhood, as well as receive personal satisfaction. Time management, as we shall see, was a crucial aspect of this project; especially for Talbot, whose position in life was, in many ways, subordinate, taking charge of her own time in this concrete way was an important means for gaining control over her life and circumstances. Talbot's project of self-discipline through time management also highlights questions of gender from many aspects; rationality and self-control were considered to be predominantly masculine characteristics in the eighteenth century, which made women's practice of them potentially subversive. However, at the same time, I will argue that Talbot used the practices of self-discipline to achieve primarily traditional feminine virtues.

Even though journalising was very common amongst the literary elite classes of eighteenth-century England, and especially women were encouraged by didactic writers to keep track of their time in order to avoid wasting it, records of time spent as meticulous as Catherine Talbot's are extraordinary, if not unique. Spending one's time productively had important national

and social implications in eighteenth-century England; as Sarah Jordan has argued, in the forging of the self-understanding and identity of the 'British nation', idleness became an important quality against which Britishness was defined (2003, 17). Simultaneously, as wealth started to challenge birth as the foundation of gentility, industriousness became the middling sorts' ticket to social prestige and respect, fuelling their aspirations to join 'the better sorts' of polite society. Jordan points out, however, that the middle classes were paradoxically using their industriousness 'to leave a class known for its industry and join a class which by definition was idle' (18; see also Klein 1993b, 363-366). Idleness, in other words, was simultaneously seen as the ultimate fulfilment of social status as well as deeply threatening to the self, to society, and to the nation at large. For these reasons, time management offers an interesting and thus far little researched viewpoint through which we can examine the anxieties eighteenth-century polite society felt about their social and personal identities.



Figure 1 - Catherine Talbot by Christian Friedrich Zincke (1683/4-1767) [n.d.] © Bonhams

## 2. Catherine Talbot – the Diffident Bluestocking

Catherine Talbot was an author and a bluestocking whose essays on religious and moralist topics were published posthumously in two collections, *Reflections on the Seven Days of the Week* (1770) and *Essays on Various Subjects* (1772). Talbot spent her life living with her mother in the household of Thomas Secker (1693-1768), Bishop of Oxford and, from 1758, Archbishop of Canterbury. Talbot's father had died before her birth, and she and her mother lived off the benevolence of Secker. In the absence of a proper suitor, Talbot remained unmarried, against her own wishes. Catherine Talbot's life was, in practice, very much connected with Secker's ecclesiastical position and duties, and since she and her mother were financially entirely dependent on Secker, Talbot's position in the household was somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand, she was a gentlewoman who was not under the direct control of a male relative, but on the other hand, her situation was, in reality, a subordinate one. As she grew older, Talbot assumed the roles of Secker's housekeeper, personal secretary, and companion. She wrote in her journal that being of 'some use' and giving 'some Cheerfulness' to Secker and her mother was her 'only real business' (*JCT*, 30 October 1751, BL Add. MS 46690, ff. 27-29). Talbot was thus in a position where she was nominally independent, but in practice had very limited control over her own comings and goings; instead, Secker's activities and movements dictated many of the everyday minutiae of Talbot's life. As Rhoda Zuk notes, in her journals and letters Talbot occasionally 'voices a sardonic recognition of the narrow range of choices available to her' (2004).

Talbot's ambiguous position in the Secker household offers some initial clues concerning her obsessive self-monitoring. She was constantly expected to arrange her life around the bishop's ecclesiastical duties, as well as his personal whims. Indeed, Secker's influence on Talbot's behaviour was considerable; he was apparently a short-tempered man, and Talbot could brood for days on mistakes which had caused him to snap at her. When she was six minutes late for an appointment with him, she recorded being

Chid as I indeed deserved because Eng's time is this Month tied to a Minute, & ought I ever to make *Him* wait. Inconsiderate Animal! I was rather vexed with myself, but so foolish, so Childish, that I hate to be Chid, & altogether, being very far from well, was put out of Spirits for all day. (*JCT*, 1 February 1752, BL Add. MS 46690, f. 51)<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, Talbot was expected to act as the bishop's representative in the eyes of the world; she felt it her duty, for example, to appear daily in church and to constantly set an example to others by her behaviour. When dining privately at her friend Marchioness Grey's house and attending a concert in

<sup>2</sup> Talbot referred to Secker by the codename 'Eng[land]:' in her journals.

Easter week, she felt her mind ‘unsatisfied with such an unusual degree of Gayety’ in a week that ‘ought sure to be peculiarly Serious’ – not because she herself thought she did wrong, but because she was afraid ‘some good body or other would be offended’ with her (*JCT*, 25 March 1752, BL Add. MS 46690, f. 63). Talbot was also expected to take part in many of the sociable events of the bishop’s palace. These social responsibilities gave Talbot endless trouble; she was a naturally shy person and continually suffered feelings of inadequacy. In November 1753 she wrote in an exasperated fashion:

What can one do ... to keep just the right Medium & make a tolerable part of any Company one respects without saying a word too much? There is nothing I dread so much as being talkative Yet at my Years one must not sit like a Statue—On these occasions & on these only I sometimes wish my self back to the other side of Twenty, when my L<sup>d</sup>& Mamma are not with me, & it seems as if I should say somewhat, yet am so painfully tho’ justly diffident of my self that I had much rather hold my Tongue. I scarce ever in my Life left a Company that I valued without feeling great uneasiness from the fear of having shewn my self unworthy of bearing a part in it. (*JCT*, 12 November 1753, BL Add. MS 46688, ff. 20-23)

And later on, in another journal entry:

My heart is heavy to day. Yet without any reason except ... feeling my own want of every requisite except peacefulness towards making an Agreeable Companion ... the more strongly one feels [such Considerations] the more unfit they make one to be tolerable in Society. (*JCT*, 30 November 1753, BL Add. MS 46688, ff. 28-30)

In other words, Talbot acutely felt that she was failing in her responsibilities. For a gentlewoman, especially placed in such a representative role as Talbot’s, it was of vital importance to master the rules of politeness and to be adept in easy sociability. Gentlewomen were seen to be a crucial component of polite sociability in eighteenth-century England; in fact, scholars have argued that women’s central role in polite sociability was a specific eighteenth-century feature, and something that sets the period apart from both previous and following centuries (Klein 1993a, 103-108). According to Lawrence Klein, ‘the enhanced stature of sociability and politeness involved a normative enhancement of the feminine’ (1993a, 107; see also e.g. Glover 2011, 81-82). In other words, women became the paragons of ideal politeness, occupying a crucial place in mixed sociability, where their presence was thought to have a refining influence on men’s manners.<sup>3</sup> As another bluestocking, Hannah More, put it, the ‘rough angles and asperities of male manners are imperceptibly filed, and gradually worn smooth, by the polishing of

<sup>3</sup> On women and politeness in the eighteenth century, see e.g. Klein 1994; Cohen 1996; Vickery 1998; Carter 2001; Klein 2002; Davidson 2004; Greig 2013.

female conversation' (1777, 13-14). Therefore, the appearance of an effortless management of company was an important and inseparable part of the ideal portrait of an accomplished woman. According to Hannah Greig, the inability to perform satisfactorily on this account and a lack of talent in smooth interaction caused severe anxiety in elite women, and in a very concrete way narrowed down their opportunities in life (2013, 15-17). The ability to shine in company was extremely important for the female members of the so-called bluestocking group, in which Talbot was included, who were universally hailed as the brightest stars of entertaining sociability, 'Enlighten'd spirits' who had 'prevented the triumph of bad taste in society by instituting elegant conversation' (Troide and Cooke 2012, 412, footnote 20).<sup>4</sup>

Polite society also placed other sorts of demands on its female members. Gentlewomen were expected to conform to a set of heavily gendered, normative demands concerning their appearance, movements, accomplishments, behaviour, and character. Politeness was based on a naturalisation of a dichotomous gender difference, which resulted in an idealisation of specifically feminine behaviour in women's conduct literature. Women were claimed to be 'naturally' modest, affectionate, soft, tender, meek, pious, and chaste; therefore, a woman who did not portray these characteristics in her appearance, speech, and deeds, risked jeopardising her reputation and status within polite society (Ylivuori 2015, ch. 2 and 3). In practice, 'natural' femininity was codified as specific acts, looks, and practices that gentlewomen were expected to engage in to communicate their polite status to the outside world. Accordingly, these women played the harpsichord, danced minuets, dressed with sobriety, curtsyed gracefully, and conversed with ease to maintain not only their genteel status and polite reputation, but also their femininity.

Thus, Talbot was not only failing her social responsibilities as a companion and representative of Bishop Secker, but also falling decidedly short of the norms of ideal polite femininity that her life as a gentlewoman revolved around, and, more specifically, failing to manifest the conversational and sociable virtues she should have embodied as a bluestocking. In fact, Talbot's journals show that she subjected herself to continuous severe self-criticism for these reasons. After visiting a 'good Clever' friend, she wrote that she had 'learnt many lessons of true Good-Breeding & Good humour this day. For my own part have none of it, am monstrously Selfish Arrogant & Unpolite. How can I Continue so When I feel so strongly the Charm of Politeness' (*JCT*, 19 [June 1751], BL Add. MS 46690, f. 21). Indeed, as Zuk notes, Talbot's journals and letters 'communicate a morbid anxiety about her usefulness, and record an arduous, self-imposed regime that included the duties of housekeeper and hostess, catechizer of servants, and supervisor of children, as well as the pursuit of scholarship' (2004). Talbot observed

<sup>4</sup> On bluestockings and conversation, see also Eger 2005, 288-305.

herself with an unforgiving and critical eye, and every imperfection she detected gave rise to a new bout of self-loathing. Especially Talbot's journals, mainly addressed to either her close friend Jemima Yorke, Marchioness Grey (1722-1797) or Julia Berkeley, the daughter of Bishop Berkeley, draw a disconcerting picture of a woman engaged in agonising introspection and relentless self-discipline.

### 3. *Talbot's Method of Discipline*

Talbot's regime of self-discipline can most straightforwardly be seen as an effort to work on herself in order to resemble more closely the ideal of polite femininity that was expected from her. Through industrious self-application, she strove to learn polite languages, to read polite books, and to assume the tastes and habits of polite society – thus aspiring to become a more capable and presentable polite subject. However, I want to suggest that Talbot's time management can be interpreted as part of a larger moralist and rationalist project to aspire towards the rational control of the mind over the body, thus linking Talbot to the Enlightenment project of rational selfhood. To discuss this further, I will now analyse Talbot's journal entries more closely in order to examine what she was, in fact, doing with all this time she was so meticulously managing.

When we leave out Talbot's social and domestic engagements and look at her so-called leisure time – that is, time she was free to dispose with as she wished – it is possible to divide her documented daily activities into four groups: working (painting, needlework, handicrafts); studying (arithmetic, languages); reading (novels, plays, and religious material); and 'moral work' (philosophising, contemplating 'her evils'). Looking at these activities, it becomes clear that Talbot's military regime of self-control was aimed at personal and moral self-improvement. In a very straightforward way, her everyday work included honing her education and practising various accomplishments. She was a decent scholar and worked hard to improve her skills in French and Italian; in fact, she wrote some of her journals in French as an exercise. She read sermons and books on morality, practised painting flowers for hours at an end, and applied herself to arithmetic. An entry in her journal from December 1753 neatly summarises Talbot's daily activities:

Depuis 11 Jusqu'à 3, Lectures utiles, reflexions sérieuses & reconnoissantes [sic], quelque Lettre écrit, Promenade d'une demi heure avec un Livre, un peu d'Arithmetique, un peu d'Italien, Toilette passablement Courte. (*JCT*, 3 December 1753, BL Add. MS 46688, ff. 28-30)<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> 'From 11 to 3, useful reading, serious & grateful reflections, wrote some Letters, a half an hour's Walk with a Book, some Arithmetic, some Italian, dressing tolerably short'. All translations are mine.

This passage also reflects the moralistic attitude she had adopted towards dress and 'toilette'. Dress was a highly problematic area of polite identity construction in eighteenth-century England. On the one hand, it was a crucial part of a proper genteel appearance and considered to be an especially important and well-suited female interest. On the other hand, moralist didactic writers, such as James Fordyce and John Burton, were extremely concerned about the amount of time, energy, and money women spent in their sartorial display, and excessive fondness of dress was connected to such vices as luxuriousness, immoderation, and vanity (Fordyce 1766, I, 29-30; Burton 1793, I, 149; Klein 1993a, 110; Batchelor 2005, 9-11; Berg 2005, 4-5; Ylivuori 2015, 136-138). Accordingly, Talbot as a moralist herself was pleased if she could manage her dressing up within half an hour; anything beyond that gave her conscience serious pangs. 'Dressing from 1 to 2  $\frac{3}{4}$ . Fie upon Dress!' she exclaimed on one particularly long session in front of the mirror (*JCT*, 18 December 1751, BL Add. MS 46690, f. 41). However, Talbot was acutely aware of the meaning that polite society attached to a woman's attire, as well as the moral obligation to manage her duties to the best of her ability: 'Drest in  $\frac{1}{4}$ . but hideously ill – I do not care – yet I will mend, for to be less a dowdy w<sup>d</sup> require not a minute more time only a little more care, & one sh<sup>d</sup> do nothing ill be it never such a Trifle' (*JCT*, 18 December 1753, BL Add. MS 46688, ff. 33-35).

Underlying the immediate goal of improving her education, there seems to be the aim to acquire modest humility and mental strength in the face of life's afflictions in Talbot's regime of self-discipline. Talbot also indicates a desire to wean the body of luxury and idleness and bend it to the regulation of the will – as displayed by her contemptuous attitude towards dressing. Indeed, even though I have put down moral work as a separate category, to some extent all of Talbot's self-improvement seems to have been aimed towards moral advancement. In 1751 she wrote:

If this Summer more is given me with all its usual Delights & Advantages how shall I improve it so as to be the better for them when Winter Comes? And then (to look strangely far forward) How After a well spent Rational Winter how shall I continue to be in still a happier Disposition against another Summer? And thus to go on thro' Life how Charming! ... I have got into a strange Careless Way of losing time. Strict Tasks & Regular Hours I believe must be the way of mending That. (*JCT*, 11 May 1751, BL Add. MS 46690, f. 4)

Talbot's detailed records of her time seem to have served primarily the rationalist goal of self-perfection. To this effect, Talbot noted every wasted minute as punctually as well-spent ones: 'This day has been the more pleasing to me because I have not I think lost five minutes of it', she wrote in 1753 (*JCT*, 21 November 1753, BL Add. MS 46688, ff. 26-27). Most of her journal entries from the early years of the 1750s begin by noting the hour of waking

up – be it 5 ¼ (1 July 1751) or 8 ½ (29 November 1753; *JCT*, 1 July 1751, BL Add. MS 46690, f. 24; *JCT*, 29 November 1753, BL Add. MS 46688, ff. 28-30). She felt an obligation to confess honestly whenever she had been idle; ‘Let me own then that much of my time has moved heavily & uselessly to day from a stupid lumpish heaviness & uncomfortableness’, she wrote to Julia Berkeley (*JCT*, 2 November 1753, BL Add. MS 46688, ff. 17-19). In other words, Talbot aimed at transparent and truthful disclosure in her time-monitoring. She not only kept a conscientious track of her daily time, but often reflected in her journals on the use she had made of her time during the past month or months. When looking back to summer 1751, she worried that it had been wasted: ‘I fear I as usual so broke my time with a thousand little errands & employments that I did not make the improvement of it I might & ought to have done’ (*JCT*, 30 October 1751, BL Add. MS 46690, ff. 27-29). A few years later, she reproached herself for allowing the amusements of London to tear her away from her project of self-improvement, comparing her idle life with Julia Berkeley’s rural existence:

Wednesday Oct<sup>r</sup> ye last.

Fare thee well Thou long month. May the next be better improved! Part of it will I am sure. But Oh the wearisome hours of London! Indeed my Love yours is on the whole much the pleasanter life since you have it in your Power by daily agreeable Walks to keep up the Cheerfulness & hardyness & Activity that ones Confinement here & hanging over a Fire side is so calculated to take away, & then with what spirit may you go on uninterrupted by any thing but this necessary care of Health in a continual course of improvements! (*JCT*, 31 October 1753, BL Add. MS 46688, ff. 17-19)

Talbot liked to divide her day according to the usefulness of her tasks. Mornings and afternoons were to be spent soberly, while more frivolous employments, such as reading ‘Trifling Books’ – though ‘a necessary Medicine sometimes’ – should be ‘always defer[red] ... till after Dinner if Possible’ (*JCT*, 2 February 1754, BL Add. MS 46688, ff. 36-37). Even though Talbot as a staunch moralist looked down on such low entertainment as farcical comedies and French novels, she nevertheless managed to draw useful lessons from them:

I have been too idle to day, as I might have employed myself much better than in reading a french Book, which however gave me as I went along many serious & grateful reflexions, as it exhibited scenes of Misery which tho’ in this Book fictitious are too common in real Life not to make persons whose situation is so peculiarly happy as Yours & mine sincerely & humbly thankful. This Book gives I fear too true a Picture of the Universal Profligacy of the French Nation. (*JCT*, 6 November 1753, BL Add. MS 46688, ff. 20-23)

Chastising the body in order to strengthen her character was one of Talbot’s most important self-appointed tasks. The mere limits of her physique often

prevented Talbot from employing her time to the utmost effectuality; when her family insisted on her getting seven hours of sleep a night to maintain her health, she complained that ‘by this Means I do nothing, have no time’ (*JCT*, 1 February 1752, BL Add. MS 46690, f. 51). In fact, Talbot saw her frail human body mostly as a nuisance which demanded pampering and thus hindered the full development of her mind: ‘But how Slow Alas how perpetually interrupted is the Progress of embodied Mind! A Mind too of so slight a Make, in a Body so liable to weariness, & that makes such large demands of time for refreshment & amusement’ (*JCT*, 26 June 1751, BL Add. MS 46690, f. 22). Therefore, Talbot endeavoured to harden her body by various methods. She regularly read standing or walking in order to better both her mind and body simultaneously, and could impose unpleasant tasks on herself to strengthen her mind over matter:

[At 11 ¼] Returned to my own room, read both English & Italian & mostly standing, settled some Accounts &c till 1 ¼ ... Walked absolutely in the Dark & very Cold till 7. & by that time found it grow very agreeable. Tis the Case of most disagreeable things that are upon the whole right & good for one: A very little use makes them not unpleasant, a very little Reflexion Delightful. (*JCT*, 1 November 1753, BL Add. MS 46688, ff. 17-19)

Not only her body, but Talbot’s spirits also regularly failed her in her project of self-improvement. A particularly gloomy journal entry describes her occasional melancholy: ‘Saturday ready to hang my self. Jaded to Death & almost ill’ (*JCT*, [n.d., 1745-1753?], BL Add. MS 46688, f. 14). She often recorded herself too weary or low-spirited, ‘heavy & dull’ or ‘épuisée’ to work effectually, and was liable to bouts of melancholy and depression, which she however condemned as an ungrateful weakness that prevented the proper management of her social duties (*JCT*, 19 December 1753, BL Add. MS 46688, ff. 31-32; 17 July 1753, BL Add. MS 46690, f. 87). She recorded herself feeling dejected in 1752: ‘Wicked Fool! for does not this hurt & grieve Dearest M[ama]: & is it not unreasonable, groundless – O Fie Fie! These reflections have cost me bitter Tears. I hope useful ones’ (*JCT*, 3 March 1752, BL Add. MS 46690, f. 59). Undoubtedly Talbot felt the weight of the social requirement for women’s constant cheerfulness, which followed from their role in polite society as the soother of men’s troubles and the light-hearted amuser of the company, and fought to overcome her unfeminine gloominess.<sup>6</sup>

Undeniably, questions of femininity and masculinity are immediately relevant to Talbot’s project of self-improvement. Talbot’s struggle towards self-perfection is a feature that can be connected to the so-called ‘Enlightenment subject’ – that is, the subject as a rational agent who believes that the self is fully within an individual’s power to perfect through ‘disengagement and rational control’, an idea forwarded by, for example, John Locke in *An*

<sup>6</sup> On the feminine ideal of cheerfulness, see Ylivuori 2015, 158-160.

*Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689; see Taylor 1989, 160-163; Hall 2004, 24). However, Locke and other propagators of rational selfhood generally excluded women from their philosophical considerations, since women were thought to be 'by definition irrational beings' (Hall 2004, 28). Catherine Talbot's project of rational self-improvement and her rejection of the glorification of sentiment can be seen as a means of taking part in this supposedly masculine sphere – striving towards autonomous, moral, and rational subjectivity. In this sense, Talbot can be connected to an eighteenth-century tradition of proto-feminist philosophical critique, including such well-established names as Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Astell, who aimed to establish women as equally capable of rationality and self-control as men.<sup>7</sup>

#### 4. *Youth and Self-formation*

There is a perceivable change of tone in Talbot's journals from her youth to old age regarding self-improvement and self-discipline. As Talbot herself notes, her young self was a giddy creature who loitered her days away and allowed her mind to be 'full of Vain Anxiety & foolish unhappiness' (*JCT*, 1 February 1752, BL Add. MS 46690, f. 51). Only in her thirties did Talbot begin her project of relentless self-improvement, which she apparently again eased up somewhat in her later years. She also often reflected on her progress, condemning her 'Stupid Worthless Vehement' younger self and expressing gratitude for having been 'led into Uniform Rational Happiness & a State of Improvement' in her more mature years (*JCT*, 12 November 1751, BL Add. MS 46690, f. 33). In other words, time also played another role in Talbot's project of self-improvement in the form of dividing her life cycle into different parts. Youth was, both in Talbot's mind and according to the general didactic ideal of female education, the time for the cultivation of virtues and the formation of character.

Repeatedly regretting having wasted the valuable days of her youth in leisure, Talbot was also determined to help others to avoid making the same mistake. To this effect, she took an interest in the matters of a young friend of the family, Julia Berkeley, daughter of Bishop Berkeley:

Je m'interesse pour elle, Je l'aime, il me semble que c'est un de mes Devoirs [illegible] tons ses petits défauts & de les redresser. Elle m'aimè tant, on a une telle Confiance en moi – Est-ce encore ma mêler de ce qui n'est pas mon affaire? (*JCT*, 30 July 1753, BL Add. MS 46690, f. 90)<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> On women's capability of rationality and English proto-feminism in the Enlightenment period, see e.g. Simonton 2005, 36-37; O'Brien 2009, 11-20, *passim*.

<sup>8</sup> 'I take an interest in her, I love her, it seems to me that it is one of my duties to [illegible] her little imperfections and correct them. She loves me dearly and has confidence

Talbot pondered in 1753, and quickly decided that it was her duty to try and reform Julia into feminine perfection:

I found my Dear Girl so neatly dress'd, so composed, so reasonable, & so fond of following her little Plan of Employments, that it has given me infinite Satisfaction & Thankfulness. Surely I ... owe every Care I can give to such a Sweet Child as this who seems Providentially thrown under my influence ... Ill should I repay the Esteem I was undeservedly honour'd with by her Father ... if I did not endeavour all I could to form & sooth this Young Mind Capable of becoming every thing it ought. (*JCT*, 6 August 1753, BL Add. MS 46690, f. 93)

Talbot convinced Julia to follow her own programme of meticulous journalising and maximum utilisation of time, and expected the girl to send her daily accounts of her doings so that Talbot could superintend whether her time was spent in the most useful way. Talbot soon had reason to be displeased with her pupil, for

the Journal was not however by any means what I wished it ... I extracted the two first days out of your Journal with great ease & pleasure because they were regularly writ & on the whole well spent. Yet in Tuesday you will see there are three hours unaccounted for ... I dare say in every [day] you spent many hours very well, & if any were loiter'd away do not be discouraged my Dear but only endeavour that this week may be still better improved than the last.<sup>9</sup>

Some weeks later, Talbot was forced to chide Julia again: 'By what Perverse Accident is it that I have never yet since we left Cuddesden [*sic*] had one such Letter & Journal from my Julia as I Hoped & she Promised? ... My own Path is in Clear Sunshine. May Yours be so!' (CT to Julia Berkeley, 28 November 1753, BL Add. 46688, ff. 28-30).<sup>10</sup>

Julia's failings grieved Talbot, for she saw the brief years of youth as the period when a woman's character and accomplishments should be formed. 'What will become of my Julia if she dreams away, & in dull unpleasant dreams too, this golden Opportunity of uninterrupted leisure with the benefit of M<sup>rs</sup> B: & the Governor to assist, regulate, applaud & delight in her daily improvements', Talbot bemoaned (*JCT*, 14 October 1753, BL Add. MS 46688, ff. 24-25). She firmly believed that true happiness was to be found through improvement, not self-indulgence, and criticised the common empty-headed female way of life and

in me – Then again, is it my business to mix myself with something that does not concern me?' I have reproduced Talbot's small grammatical errors as they appear in the original journal.

<sup>9</sup> Catherine Talbot [CT] to Julia Berkeley, 30 October 1753, BL Add. MS 46688, ff. 15-16.

<sup>10</sup> Cuddesdon Palace was Bishop Secker's residence in Oxfordshire.

those poor idle Girls who for want of knowing how to amuse themselves at home are forced to fancy themselves happy in the continual & wearisome repetition of the same insipid Diversions Day after day till they grow uneasily conscious themselves that every body else is tired of seeing them. (CT to Julia Berkeley, 9 November, 1753, BL Add. MS 46688, ff. 20-23)

However, Talbot herself also often failed to live up to her own standards, and repeatedly chided herself for failing to follow her plan of self-improvement – either by being idle, working half-heartedly, or spending her time in morally reprehensible ways, like reading French novels, for example.<sup>11</sup> For Julia's complaints of ennui, listlessness, or want of spirits, common enough amongst elite females, she recommended 'constant Exercise' and going on 'diligently & regularly with your employments & your Journal'; in this way, these complaints would 'cease of [them] self' (*JCT*, 9 November 1753, BL Add. MS 46688, ff. 20-23). Talbot herself, however, managed to repel her gloom by cheerful employment only occasionally.

### 5. *Self-discipline, Pleasure, and Freedom*

Talbot's self-imposed regime of discipline not only bettered her social and domestic skills, but it also seems to have brought her an acute sense of private satisfaction. Not only did she believe that 'Our true Happiness lies not in Enjoyment but Improvement', but she appears to have experienced tremendous secret joy from the thought of, for example, being able to 'steal an hour & be up before 5', and thus push herself towards the limits of her mental and physical capabilities.<sup>12</sup> In other words, she engaged in self-improvement not only to achieve particular goals, such as bettering her arithmetical skills, but also to experience pleasure and a sense of achievement. In this sense, Talbot's project comes close to the enjoyment received from ascetic exercises, such as, for example, dieting. The feminist philosopher Cressida Heyes suggests in her Foucauldian analysis of modern dieting that the practices of dieting provide satisfaction for the dieter; they give the individual an 'active, creative sense of self-development, mastery, expertise, and skill' (2007, 78). Talbot's regime of self-discipline seems to have had similar effects on her. Moreover, Talbot's self-improvement scheme also highlights the elision between mastering oneself and caring for oneself in a Foucauldian sense, suggesting, as Heyes formulates it, that 'the controlled and relentlessly self-disciplined persona is

<sup>11</sup> *JCT*, 26 June 1751, BL Add. MS 46690, f. 22: 'A Pleasant Leisure day – But alas how useless am I, & how little improvement do I make of all this leisure'.

<sup>12</sup> CT to Jemima Yorke, Marchioness Grey, 25 July 1761, Bedfordshire and Luton Records and Archives, Wrest Park Manuscripts, no. 750/635; *JCT*, 3 November 1753, BL Add. MS 46688, f. 19.

also the most ethically responsible' (85). Thus, Talbot was essentially engaged in a project of ethical self-care and self-formation; she felt that her regime of self-discipline made her a morally superior person compared to both her own younger days and to other, idle and frivolous females.

In fact, Talbot's project of self-improvement can be interpreted as an aspiration towards autonomy both in respect to the free and rational 'Enlightened subject' as well as in a Foucauldian sense. Namely, self-discipline was not only a source of pleasure for women; it was also a source of freedom in several ways. Michel Foucault in *The Use of Pleasure* describes the care of self as a practice of freedom, his point being that controlling one's pleasures makes one free from those pleasures (1992, 78-80). Thus, discipline is a prerequisite of freedom. Indeed, according to Michael Schoenfeldt, early modern culture imagined a regime of self-discipline to be a necessary step towards any prospect of liberation. That is to say, for eighteenth-century subjects, self-control authorised individuality (1999, 11). This, of course, was the underlying principle of Locke's formulation of selfhood as a rational endeavour towards self-perfection.

Freedom in Foucauldian thought is a contested subject; since our choices themselves are culturally constituted, freedom cannot, in reality, mean any form of autonomous self-government. This has led many commentators to argue that there is no concept of freedom in Foucault's thought, since there is no truly autonomous subject (Butler 1993, 15; Oksala 2005, 2-3). However, Johanna Oksala argues that practices relating to care for the self can be seen as a deliberate part of freedom. Through critically reflecting on themselves and their conduct, subjects can cultivate and practise freedom and stylise the possibilities that open up around them. According to Oksala, the quest for freedom in Foucauldian thought becomes a question of 'developing forms of subjectivity that are capable of functioning as resistance to normalising power' (2005, 12).

Foucault argues that freedom acquired through self-care is essentially power; power that individuals use over themselves, but also power that they use over others. This is why self-control is, in Foucault's analysis, a masculine virtue; it is expected from those who are in charge, and it is considered to be indispensable for good government (1992, 80-84). The association between control and liberty was common in eighteenth-century political thought; Edmund Burke, for example, wrote that 'Men are qualified for civil liberty in exact proportion to their disposition to put moral chains upon their own appetites' (1989, quoted in Davidson 2004, 8). This capability for self-control was represented to be a masculine prerogative; women were considered to be naturally prone to vanity, excess, and luxury, and incapable of rational self-control (Armstrong 1987, 59-69; Kaplan 1987, 161-162; Mullan 1988, 207-227). By these means, women were effectively excluded from political power. The political rights attached to self-discipline also meant that any display of self-control in a woman was deeply disconcerting and politically subversive, since it undermined the patriarchal system of power. Therefore, female self-discipline was labelled unfeminine, something that made a woman's gender

suspicious. This is why Catherine Talbot's regime of self-control unfolds as an extremely controversial set of acts that bear deep gendered and power-related meanings. Catherine Talbot's case shows that she not only believed that women were capable of self-control, but she was also engaged with active self-formation and self-discipline to become an ethical, autonomous subject. When self-control was perceived as a masculine trait, the act of exercising discipline over a feminine self can be seen as an empowering act – a move away from normative passive femininity towards active masculinity.

Questions of gender are thus, in many ways, central for eighteenth-century practices of self-discipline. As Foucault writes, 'self-mastery was a way of being a man with respect to oneself', whereas 'immoderation derives from a passivity that relates it to femininity' (1992, 82, 84). There is, of course, a long tradition of seeing women as symbols of the flesh – licentious, gluttonous, unrestrainable. Therefore, women also have a centuries-old tradition of disciplining that flesh in an effort to rise to the level of spirit and to become, metaphorically speaking, male (Bynum 1988, 217). In this sense, Catherine Talbot's efforts of self-discipline resemble, for example, the extreme fasting of medieval woman saints that Caroline Bynum has researched; they can both be seen as a part of a historical continuum of women's ascetic practices, aimed at controlling and subduing the desires of the flesh in order to gain spirituality and/or rationality, either in one's own eyes or in the face of society.

When interpreted like this, self-discipline can be seen as a strategy for negotiating controversial desires and freedom from feminised conduct norms in other areas of life. Bynum suggests that medieval women's fasting was not merely substituting control of self for control of circumstance; instead, it gave women actual power over their lives and made it possible for them to reject traditional feminine duties and roles (1988, 220). Similarly, eighteenth-century women's engagement with self-discipline can be seen as a strategy for escaping the traditional domestic model of femininity. Deborah Heller has argued that bluestockings and other female intellectuals adhered to a strict regime of self-regulation that helped them 'secure liberation on other fronts', such as intellectual pursuits (2002, 234).<sup>13</sup> In other words, these women compensated for their unfeminine roles as female wits, poets, and scholars with strict disciplinary femininity in other areas of life – like Talbot did by balancing her intellectual impulses to 'Athenianise, Philosophise, Criticise, Debate, Discourse & Laugh' with her bluestocking friends by striving towards piety, morality, industriousness, and other normative feminine qualities in her personal life.<sup>14</sup> In other words, self-discipline was a powerful strategy for escaping gendered conduct expectations.

<sup>13</sup> See also Myers 1990, 2; Matchinske 1998, 20; Smith 2008, 165-187; Major 2012, 72-75.

<sup>14</sup> CT to Jemima Yorke, Marchioness Grey, 3 November 1750, Bedfordshire and Luton Records and Archives, Wrest Park Manuscripts, no. 2895.

However, it is important to notice that by assuming unfeminine roles in the intellectual sphere, women like Talbot bound themselves all the more thoroughly to the domesticised norms of female chastity and morality in their attempt to compensate for their intellectual digressions. Their emancipatory actions in some areas of conduct thus simultaneously served to reinforce patriarchy in other areas. In this way, self-discipline also played an important role in forming normative feminine eighteenth-century subjectivities. Mastering the ideal social and polite skills expected from well-bred women required diligent practice and constant vigilance (Heller 2002, 218). Indeed, this seems to be what Catherine Talbot was after, as well: to her, her project of self-improvement was a quest towards responsible, ethical – and to a large extent, normative – femininity. The ideals that Talbot strived for – such as domesticity and Christian morality – were ideals that were routinely labelled as feminine within the polite society, and Talbot clearly observed her own performances through the authoritative spectacles of these dominant discourses. Therefore, even if Catherine Talbot's strategy of self-improvement brought her experiences of pleasure and freedom, her self-disciplining was not enabling in the sense that it would have provided her with absolute freedom from feminine roles or behaviour. This is the Foucauldian subjectivity paradox; the ethical work one puts in to develop oneself produces subjectivity that is normative, yet the subject nevertheless feels that this subjectivity is autonomous.

Even if Talbot was aiming for discursive moral femininity, the process of self-care transformed her aspirations from external coercion into internal selfhood, thus providing her with a sense of autonomy. As we have seen, time management played a key role in this project; arguably because women in general and Talbot especially had a limited control over the use of their own time, managing the little they had could provide them with a sense of taking control over their own lives on a very concrete level, thus enforcing a sense of independent subjectivity. While her aim was to better fulfil the requirements of normative polite femininity, her conformity also paradoxically brought her subversive freedom through the rational autonomous selfhood she acquired through time management and self-discipline.

## 6. *Conclusion*

This article has examined Catherine Talbot's almost compulsive monitoring of her time, and her efforts to spend that time as diligently as possible in the attempt to achieve control of the self. I have argued that the duties and expectations Talbot encountered as a gentlewoman, bluestocking, and Bishop Secker's *protégée* caused her anxiety that she aimed to control by engaging in a regime of self-improvement. Through a carefully regulated program of work and exercise, Talbot aimed to acquire the qualities deemed crucial for

a gentlewoman in her position, such as the ability to paint flowers, speak French, and do basic arithmetic. However, her ultimate goal was the moral advancement and self-control she felt she received through these ascetic exercises and time management; this, in turn, translated into a sense of rational, autonomous identity and ethical selfhood.

Based on this examination, it is possible to argue that time management played an important and heretofore largely unresearched part in eighteenth-century elite women's identity construction. Time management ties together and opens up aspects of gender, social status, rank, ethnicity, and nationality in interesting and novel ways. There are numerous interesting paths for future research to pick up in this area. For example, leisure and idleness held simultaneously positive and negative connotations as signifiers of wealth and high rank as well as immoral foreignness and racial Otherness; the leisured individuals showed themselves in different light depending on their setting and audience.<sup>15</sup> Having time to spend, and the means of spending it, also held different meanings for men and women, whose relationship to time and its management was fundamentally different because of their respective places in society. The degree to which men engaged in similar practices of time measurement and control remains to be discovered. Moreover, industriousness was an important Christian ideal, and women's allegedly natural alliance with religion made diligence a particularly valued feminine quality. At the same time, however, women were criticised for their supposedly innate bent for idleness and frivolity. Such aspects of time management deserve closer scholarly attention in the future, since they are intimately tied to personal and group identities and, indeed, address some of the fundamental questions of eighteenth-century identity construction.

#### *Works Cited*

##### *Manuscript Sources*

Bedfordshire and Luton Records and Archives, Bedford [BLRA], 'Wrest Park Manuscripts' [Wrest MS]. Letters from Catherine Talbot [CT] to Jemima, Marchioness Grey, 1740-1769. Originals lost, archive transcriptions. Nos. 18997, 448-930.

British Library, London [BL], Additional Manuscripts [Add. MS] 46688, 'Berkeley Papers', Journals of Catherine Talbot [JCT], 6 Nov. 1743 – 6 Feb. 1754.

British Library, London, Additional Manuscripts 46690, 'Berkeley Papers', Journal of Catherine Talbot [JCT] addressed to 'Angelina' ... 4 May 1751 – 10 Sept. 1753.

<sup>15</sup> On the corruptness of excessive leisure and its connection to ethnicity and climate theory, see e.g. Wheeler 2000, esp. ch. 4.

*Printed Sources*

- Armstrong Nancy (1987), *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Batchelor Jennie (2005), *Dress, Distress and Desire: Clothing and the Female Body in Eighteenth-Century Literature*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan.
- Berg Maxine (2005), *Luxury and Pleasure in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Burke Edmund (1989 [1791]), 'Letter to a Member of the National Assembly', in P. Langford, L.G. Mitchell, W.B. Todd, eds, *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke: Vol. 8, The French Revolution, 1790-1794*, Oxford, Clarendon Press.
- Burton John (1793), *Lectures on Female Education and Manners*, Rochester, Gillman and Etherington, 2 vols.
- Butler Judith (1993), *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'*, New York-London, Routledge.
- Bynum Caroline Walker (1988 [1987]), *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*, Berkeley, University of California Press.
- Carter Philip (2001), *Men and the Emergence of Polite Society, Britain 1660-1800*, Harlow, Longman.
- Cohen Michèle (1996), *Fashioning Masculinity: National Identity and Language on the Eighteenth Century*, London, Routledge.
- Davidson Jenny (2004), *Hypocrisy and the Politics of Politeness: Manners and Morals from Locke to Austen*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Eger Elizabeth (2005), '“The Noblest Commerce of Mankind”: Conversation and Community in the Bluestocking Circle', in S. Knott and B. Taylor, eds, *Women, Gender and Enlightenment*, Basingstoke-New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 288-305.
- Fordyce James (1766), *Sermons to Young Women*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed., London, 2 vols.
- Foucault Michel (1992 [1984]), *The Use of Pleasure: The History of Sexuality*, vol. II, trans. by Robert Hurley, London, Penguin Books.
- Glover Katharine (2011), *Elite Women and Polite Society in Eighteenth-Century Scotland*, Woodbridge, Boydell Press.
- Greig Hannah (2013), *The Beau Monde: Fashionable Society in Georgian London*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Hall D.E. (2004), *Subjectivity*, New York-London, Routledge.
- Heller Deborah (2002), 'Subjectivity Unbound: Elizabeth Vesey as the Sylph in Bluestocking Correspondence', *Huntington Library Quarterly* 65, 1, 215-234.
- Heyes C.J. (2007), *Self-Transformations: Foucault, Ethics, and Normalized Bodies*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Jordan Sarah (2003), *The Anxieties of Idleness: Idleness in Eighteenth-Century British Literature and Culture*, Lewisburg, Bucknell University Press.
- Kaplan Cora (1987), 'Wild Nights: Pleasure/Sexuality/Feminism', in N. Armstrong and L. Tennenhouse, eds, *The Ideology of Conduct: Essays on Literature and the History of Sexuality*, New York-London, Methuen, 160-184.
- Klein L.E. (1993a), 'Gender, Conversation and the Public Sphere in Early Eighteenth-Century England', in J. Still and M. Worton, eds, *Textuality and Sexuality: Reading Theories and Practices*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 100-115.

- Klein L.E. (1993b), 'Politeness for Plebes: Consumption and Social Identity in Early Eighteenth-Century England', in A. Bermingham and J. Brewer, eds, *The Consumption of Culture 1600-1800: Image, Object, Text*, London-New York, Routledge, 362-382.
- Klein L.E. (1994), *Shaftesbury and the Culture of Politeness: Moral Discourse and Cultural Politics in Early Eighteenth-Century England*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Klein L.E. (2002), 'Politeness and the Interpretation of the British Eighteenth Century', *The Historical Journal* 45, 4, 869-898.
- Locke John (1979 [1689]), *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, with an introduction by P.H. Nidditch, Oxford, Clarendon Press.
- Major Emma (2012 [2011]), *Madam Britannia: Women, Church, and Nation, 1712-1812*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Matchinske Megan (1998), *Writing, Gender and State in Early Modern England: Identity Formation and the Female Subject*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- More Hannah (1777), *Essays on Various Subjects, Principally Designed for Young Ladies*, London, J. Wilkie and T. Cadell.
- Mullan John (1988), *Sentiment and Sociability: The Language of Feeling in the Eighteenth Century*, Oxford, Clarendon Press.
- Myers S.H. (1990), *The Bluestocking Circle: Women, Friendship, and the Life of the Mind in Eighteenth-Century England*, Oxford, Clarendon Press.
- O'Brien Karen (2009), *Women and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Oksala Johanna (2005), *Foucault on Freedom*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Schoenfeldt M.C. (1999), *Bodies and Selves in Early Modern England: Physiology and Inwardness in Spenser, Shakespeare, Herbert, and Milton*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Simonton Deborah (2005), 'Women and Education', in H. Barker and E. Chalus, eds, *Women's History: Britain 1700-1850. An Introduction*, London-New York, Routledge, 33-56.
- Smith Tania (2008), 'Elizabeth Montagu's Study of Cicero's Life: The Formation of an Eighteenth-Century Woman's Rhetorical Identity', *Rhetorica: A Journal of the History of Rhetoric* 26, 2, 165-187.
- Talbot Catherine (1770), *Reflections on the Seven Days of the Week*, London.
- Talbot Catherine (1772), *Essays on various Subjects*, London, John and Francis Rivington, 2 vols.
- Taylor Charles (1989), *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press.
- Troide L.E. and S.J. Cooke, eds (2012), *The Early Journals and Letters of Fanny Burney: Volume V, 1782-1783*, Montreal-Kingston-London-Ithaca, McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Vickery Amanda (1998), *The Gentleman's Daughter: Women's Lives in Georgian England*, New Haven, Yale University Press.
- Wheeler Roxann (2000), *The Complexion of Race: Categories of Difference in Eighteenth-Century British Culture*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press.

- Ylivuori Soile (2015), *Women's Bodies and the Culture of Politeness: Creating and Contesting Gendered Identities in Eighteenth-Century England*, PhD Dissertation, Helsinki, University of Helsinki.
- Zuk Rhoda (2004), 'Talbot, Catherine (1721-1770)', in L. Goldman, ed., *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online ed., <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/26921>>, accessed 15 February 2017.