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Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity

The French Revolution (1789–99) represents a momentous turning point in the history of gender in Europe, since new political ideas that might have brought about a shift towards increased political rights for women instead justified, at least in theory, a much more strict separation of male and female spheres. Explaining how this occurred requires an examination of how the philosophical flowering known as the Enlightenment (*c.* 1685–*c.* 1789) prompted European thinkers to place increased emphasis on self-control and the attainment of individual virtue. It also requires an exploration of how the concept of citizenship came to be linked to the glorification of the citizen-soldier and the male head of a conjugal unit over the course of the revolutionary period.

Tracking the interrelationship of gender norms and political ideals from the late eighteenth to the early nineteenth century reveals the degree to which understandings about appropriate political roles for men and women were integral to the debates about the distribution of political power. At the very moment when human equality was being forwarded as a revolutionary slogan, women were pointedly demonstrating their capacity to think and to be active participants in politics. Simultaneously, a counter-current of thought was being promulgated that suggested that women were incapable of self-possession and needed to be protected from the storms of modernity that were building in strength throughout Europe. Explaining not only how this seeming paradox operated but also how in some respects the very notions of liberty, equality, and fraternity depended on a more aggressive subordination of women will be the theme of this chapter.

The Enlightenment

Prince Shcherbatov's dislike of Russia's female monarchs, discussed in the first vignette, was part of a long tradition in European religious and social thought that saw passion as corrupting and women as too susceptible to the wild extremes of pleasure. The core of this tradition was the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis, in which Eve succumbed to the entreaties of the devil and then

tempted Adam to do the same. Preventing sin and social disorder meant keeping women away from sources of power and firmly subordinated to male control, first in the form of the father and then in the form of the husband. Women, the Bible implied, had to be obedient for their own sakes. Only the surrender of wilfulness would keep them away from dangerous apples. Eve's weakness in the face of temptation stood as an enduring metaphor for what Shcherbatov described as the "corruption of morals"—a danger to male souls that could only be thwarted if women were kept subordinate.

This moral outlook was evident throughout the continent in the middle of the eighteenth century. Indeed, in significant respects, the intellectual developments associated with the Enlightenment strengthened these concerns. The assault on traditional religion made by some of the scientific and secular trends of the period is easy to overstate. Instead, as Norman Davies has pointed out, it is more accurate to talk of an Enlightenment ethic against "fanaticism" or, more broadly, "enthusiasm."¹ Put another way, the Enlightenment was largely about control, beginning with self-control and continuing through control of social systems and ultimately to the control of nature itself. The exercise of reason as a form of external discipline, a check against the ignorance of folk tradition, the self-interested teachings of church leaders, and the dark continent of human nature itself was a key feature of this search for control.

It is important to note that reason in the "Age of Reason" was not disembodied. Rationality found its power only when it was applied to nature broadly defined. This was especially evident in the dramatic changes in scientific thinking that occurred on the eve of the Enlightenment. In the astronomical observations of Nicolaus Copernicus (1473–1543) and Johannes Kepler (1571–1630), the physical laws of Isaac Newton (1643–1727), and the biological classifications of Carl Linnaeus (1707–1778), scientists sought not only to apply reason and (often mathematical) logic to the natural world, but also to demonstrate that the natural world had its own internal logic. Planets moved in regular patterns, gravity exercised its influence everywhere in the universe, and species existed around the globe, already differentiated from each other and awaiting only the proper mode of observation. Nature, in other words, had laws, and these natural laws provided the context for everything else, including the behavior of human beings and the exercise of rationality itself.

This embodiment of reason and the inner rationality of nature helped to account for the dualities, even self-contradictions, of much Enlightened thought, including that of individual thinkers who combined the abstract and metaphysical operations of reason with the very concrete and physical observations of natural conditions. Indeed, many of the most heated

¹ Norman Davies, *Europe: A History* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 596.

intellectual debates dealt with questions of “epistemology”—the study of how we know what we know. Some, such as Francis Bacon (1561–1626) and John Locke (1632–1704), argued that humans create knowledge by observing and sensing their surroundings and inferring patterns from the data they accumulate. Others, like René Descartes (1596–1650), started from the proposition that only a mind pre-equipped with the capacity to reason could create knowledge and meaning from the sensory stimuli provided by bodily organs.

These philosophical developments had significant implications for the way that human beings studied themselves and understood gender difference. On the one hand, the presence of universal and rational laws led to expectations of a fundamental equality for all human beings. If everyone was a member of the same species and equally subject to the laws of physics, then it followed that at the most basic level all humans were equal. Descartes’s philosophy of abstract reason provided for a separation of body and soul that worked in favor of ideas of sexual and other types of equality. If the body did not make any difference to thought, then neither sex could be said to have a greater capacity to reason.² On the other hand, the observation of human society revealed a condition of deep inequality. Women throughout Europe (and almost everywhere one looked outside of Europe as well) were subordinated to men, held to be unequal and treated unequally. They were physically different, dressed differently and, many argued, shared sex-based behavioral characteristics. Shcherbatov’s claims, for instance, that women loved “luxury” and “despotism” more than men were not at all unusual.

The contradiction between equality in principle and inequality in practice was dealt with in two major ways, which roughly corresponded to the “nature vs. nurture” debate that still rages in discussions of human inequality. Some Enlightenment thinkers followed Aristotle in arguing that all humans were *not* created equal and that the observed inequality was the result of natural inequality between men and women. In *The History of Animals* (350 BCE), Aristotle had insisted that “In all genera in which the distinction of male and female is found, nature makes a similar differentiation in the characteristics of the two sexes.”³ Others claimed that oppressive social systems had thwarted the development of the female sex and deformed the natural order. But discussions on the question of human nature were complicated by confusions regarding the term “nature” itself. “Natural” had two meanings that were only rarely differentiated by authors and readers. In the first instance it was descriptive: it described one’s surroundings as they were observed. It was in this sense that gravity was a “natural” law. In the

² Geneviève Fraisse, *Reason’s Muse: Sexual Difference and the Birth of Democracy* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), xiv.

³ Quoted in Lorraine Daston, “The Naturalized Female Intellect,” *Science in Context* 5, no. 2 (1992): 214. Daston provides a very useful summary of how concepts of nature were deployed to denigrate female intelligence in eighteenth-century France and nineteenth-century Britain.

second instance, however, it was normative—that is, it described how things *should be* rather than how they were.⁴ In this sense, male dominance was considered to be a “natural” law. Authors like Rousseau appealed to nature, to history, to biology, and to logic to defend the notion that women’s roles in society were dictated by nature, but unlike gravity this was a law that could be broken.⁵ It was not that violations could not exist in nature, but that they should not. These were very different notions of “natural law,” but both were treated as if they were scientific propositions of the same order—a confusion that still exists today when politicians or activists argue that specific human behaviors (same-sex relationships, for instance) should be forbidden because they are “unnatural.”

This contrast between the descriptive and normative meanings of “nature” was especially salient in discussions of the “woman question” in elite European circles in the eighteenth century, most notably in France. Women were becoming ever more educated and visible in aristocratic circles. Social and sartorial fashion became ever more open, as plunging necklines combined with an ethos of flirting to convince social critics that sexual propriety had collapsed. Many condemned what they saw as a rise of adultery and perversion. Similarly, when several important women formed intellectual circles in their salons (gatherings of artists and intellectuals held in the homes of wealthy patrons), they discovered new realms of cultural freedom and influence. Julie de Lespinasse and Anne-Thérèse de Marguenat de Courcelles, marquise de Lambert, for instance, hosted popular salons in Paris where the most important cultural, philosophical, and political events of the day were discussed.⁶ These gatherings were more than merely sociable; they were important spheres of political debate where pre-revolutionary ideas were formulated.⁷ The salons produced a lively debate

⁴ Dorinda Outram, *The Enlightenment*, 4th edition (Cambridge ; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 111. It should be noted that these debates about the relationship between nature and gender roles took place across Europe. See for example Mónica Bolufer Peruga, “New Inflections of a Long Polemic: The Debate between the Sexes in Enlightenment Spain,” in *A New History of Iberian Feminisms* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018), 38–49.

⁵ See for example his 1750 *Discours sur les sciences et les arts* (*Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*).

⁶ On Madame de Lambert and her complex feminism, see Katharine J. Hamerton, “A Feminist Voice in the Enlightenment Salon: Madame de Lambert on Taste, Sensibility, and the Feminine Mind,” *Modern Intellectual History* 7, no. 2 (August 2010): 209–38.

⁷ See Dena Goodman, *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1994); Daniel Gordon, *Citizens without Sovereignty: Equality and Sociability in French Thought, 1670–1789* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); and Anthony J. La Vopa, *The Labor of the Mind: Intellect and Gender in Enlightenment Cultures* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017). Goodman argues that Rousseau had a lasting impact on later interpretations of the salons that underrated their influence in the mid-eighteenth century (pp. 62–3). The salons eventually did lose their power, however, and “when the literary public sphere was transformed into the political public sphere in 1789, it had already become masculine” (p. 280).

about the supposed differences between the male and female mind, and most argued that men's ability to perform physically strenuous work somehow made them more capable of abstract thought, while women's intellectual labors in the salons were simply sociable and playful.⁸ The fact that women played such an important role in public life through the salons led some contemporary observers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78) to despair, while others proclaimed the eighteenth century the “century of women.”⁹ For example, in his utopian novel *The Journey of Niels Klim to the World Underground*, the Danish philosopher and historian Ludvig Holberg (1684–1754) has his main character visit the fictional province of Cocklecu, where the interpretation of natural differences is reversed, and men's superior physical strength is interpreted as a natural sign that they are better suited to the “drudgery of the kitchen” and to the lowliest military ranks, while women serve as generals, politicians, civil servants, and the initiators of sexual relationships. The “weakness we impute to the female sex is derived solely from education,” the residents of Cocklecu respond to Klim's shocked objections.¹⁰ Similar arguments made in more philosophical language would later be made by Diderot and Condorcet.¹¹

The notion that women might gain equality and exercise independence troubled not only conservatives hostile to the emerging order, like Shcherbatov, but also many of the men who were leading the transformation in social and political thought as “enlightened” philosophers. Rousseau was easily the most influential commentator on gender and proper familial relationships in this respect. In 1761, he published an epistolary novel entitled *Julie, or the New Héloïse: Letters of Two Lovers who Live in a Small Town at the Foot of the Alps*, which became an immediate and persistent best-seller both in France and abroad in translation,¹² appearing in seventy editions by 1800.¹³ It was the story of a young woman who, in the

⁸ La Vopa, *The Labor of the Mind*, 2. See also Antoine Lilti, *The World of the Salons: Sociability and Worldliness in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁹ Lieselotte Steinbrügge, *The Moral Sex: Woman's Nature in the French Enlightenment*, trans. Pamela E. Selwyn (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 3.

¹⁰ Ludvig Holberg, *The Journey of Niels Klim to the World Underground*, trans. James I. McNelis Jr. (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1960), 90–92.

¹¹ Jonathan I. Israel, *The Enlightenment That Failed: Ideas, Revolution, and Democratic Defeat, 1748–1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 227.

¹² The most modern translation is Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Julie, or the New Héloïse: Letters of Two Lovers Who Live in a Small Town at the Foot of the Alps*, ed. Philip Stewart and Jean Vaché (Hanover: Dartmouth College Press, 1997). We are relying here on the version in Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*, 9 vols, vol. 6, ed. Roger D. Masters and Christopher Kelly (Hanover, CT: Published for Dartmouth College by University Press of New England, 1990).

¹³ Monika Nenon, “Gender in Rousseau's *Julie Ou La Nouvelle Héloïse* and Its German Reception: Radical or Moderate?,” in *The Radical Enlightenment in Germany: A Cultural Perspective*, ed. Carl Nickerk (Leiden and Boston: Brill Rodopi, 2018), 239.

early chapters of the work, succumbs to passion and engages in a secret love affair but is then forced to marry a friend of her father's. She respects her husband but feels no lust for him, and she discovers contentment and happiness in domestic life. *Julie* was popular, but it was immediately controversial. On the one hand, it alienated women who sought equality, for Rousseau's explicit message was that women had to submit to the authority of a good man and focus their energies on the household in order to be happy. On the other, it offended conservatives by frankly discussing pleasure and female desire, by portraying complex women, and by blaming conservative patriarchs rather than free thinkers or lustful women for the moral decline in France. At the end of the novel, Julie rescues her child from a lake but is then stricken by a deadly fever. She writes to her former lover, telling him that her heart is still his. This ending complicates Rousseau's insistence that women's behavior has to be viewed as a response to their place within family and society, and it explains the mixed reception of the novel. The final passage seems to be "a hymn to love."¹⁴ As Rousseau argued, he wanted to be "fair to wives," since

the cause of their disorder lies less in themselves than in our evil institutions. Ever since all the sentiments of nature have been stifled by extreme inequality, it is from the iniquitous despotism of fathers that the vices and misfortunes of children arise; it is in forced and ill-matched unions that young wives, victims of their parents' avarice or vanity, undo . . . the scandal of their original honesty.¹⁵

And yet the novel also suggests that the only way for Julie to live a contented life was to obey her father's will and forsake her passions in the interests of motherhood. Rousseau believed that only men could be truly self-realized individuals (and he thought himself to be among the most unique individuals of all—"like no one in existence").¹⁶ His assault both on coquettish adultery and patriarchal arranged marriages through the figure of a flawed but richly drawn and ultimately moral woman struck a chord throughout Europe, especially among women. Female readers identified with Rousseau's characters because so many of them chased the same dreams of loving relationships, meaningful motherhood, and happiness in the home. Rousseau's new moral order also promised women more respect, since the place and behavior of women was at its core.¹⁷ From our contemporary

¹⁴Nenon, "Gender in Rousseau's *Julie*," 250.

¹⁵Rousseau, *The Collected Writings*, 17–18.

¹⁶Anna Clark, *Alternative Histories of the Self: A Cultural History of Sexuality and Secrets, 1762–1917* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 1–2.

¹⁷Mary Seidman Trouille, *Sexual Politics in the Enlightenment: Women Writers Read Rousseau* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 4.

notions would take on a masculine flavor in the era of revolution, but they also all depended in central ways on a female willingness to serve as obedient moral compasses. This new order was bolstered and replicated not only in sentimental novels, but also in social treatises like the massive *Encyclopedia* edited by the famous philosopher Denis Diderot, which focused its investigation of the social order on male productive labor in the workplace and on the bodily attributes of female reproduction in the domestic realm. Thus philosophical investigations came to an Enlightenment consensus: humans were equal, but men and women were fundamentally different. This was a formulation of "separate but equal" that was founded on the proposition that it was nevertheless natural for men to rule and women to obey. At the very moment that the concept of nature was being employed to argue for human equality and freedom, it was also being used to exclude women from the realm of the free.²⁰ As the 1780s dawned in France, then, an important revolution of moral sensibilities had already taken place—one that promised a new nation based on the principles of liberty and equality, but only if it was run by a fraternity.

²⁰ The argument in this paragraph is derived largely from Steinbrügge, *The Moral Sex*.

²¹ Quoted in Fraisse, *Reason's Muse*, 51.

Gender, Sex and the Shaping of Modern Europe

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French Revolution to
the Present Day*

Third Edition

*Annette F. Timm and
Joshua A. Sanborn*

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