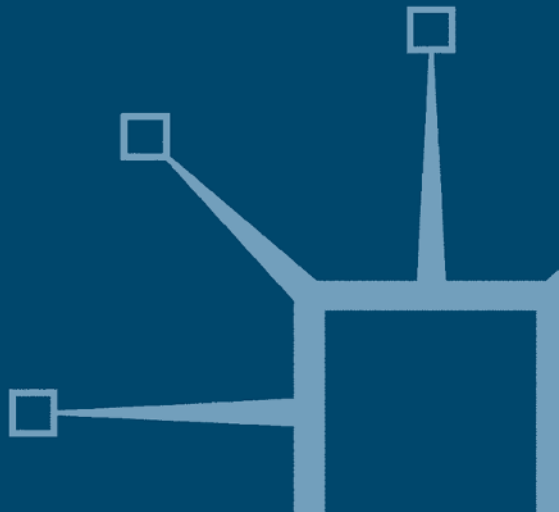


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Women, Gender and Enlightenment

Edited by
Sarah Knott and Barbara Taylor



Women, Gender and Enlightenment

Also by Barbara Taylor

EVE AND THE NEW JERUSALEM: SOCIALISM AND FEMINISM IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT AND THE FEMINIST IMAGINATION

Women, Gender and Enlightenment

edited by

Sarah Knott and Barbara Taylor



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Preface and Acknowledgements

This book is the product of a research project, 'Feminism and Enlightenment 1650–1850: A Comparative History', which ran from 1998 to 2001, sponsored by the Department of History, Royal Holloway, University of London, and the School of Cultural and Innovation Studies, University of East London, and supported by a generous grant from the Leverhulme Trust. The project was conceived and directed by Barbara Taylor; Sarah Knott was its research fellow.

The 'Feminism and Enlightenment' project was designed as a dialogue between two vigorous fields of historical enquiry. Scholars working in many disciplines had for some years been engaged in a profound re-evaluation of the Enlightenment and its disputed legacy to modern thought. The history of feminism, meanwhile, was an expanding field that over the last quarter of the twentieth century had moved away from partisan political disputes towards a more in-depth investigation into early feminism's development and legacies. The connection between Enlightenment and the rise of feminism had long been recognised, but research into this relationship had been patchy and inconclusive, with little attempt to compare developments in different sites of Enlightenment. The project's objective was to remedy this situation through a combination of detailed historical research and collective discussion.

As the project developed, its research agenda underwent a significant shift from an exclusive focus on Enlightenment feminism to a wider investigation of the gender dimension of Enlightenment. Revisionary gender attitudes in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries did not come ready labelled as feminist or proto-feminist, and confining ourselves to the most obviously pro-woman elements in Enlightenment would have meant ignoring intellectual developments – such as changes in religious beliefs – which, while they could not be described as ideologically feminist, nonetheless carried important implications for women's status. The shift of attention from feminism to the broader gender elements of Enlightenment also allowed the status of men and masculinity within Enlightenment thought and practices to be scrutinized: an important theme for any feminist study.

At the project's inception in the autumn of 1998, it involved twenty research associates, all based in the United Kingdom. By the time it formally ended in August 2001, this number had grown six-fold, with seventy-plus UK participants joined by some fifty scholars from the United States, Canada, France, Spain, Holland, Germany, Italy, and Australia – making this probably the largest comparative study of Enlightenment ever undertaken. Approximately half the research associates were historians specialising in Enlightenment and/or gender history, with the rest working in adjacent disciplines, particularly English and French literature, women's studies, philosophy, and political science.

To facilitate collaboration among the research associates, twice-annual colloquia were organised where pre-circulated papers were discussed. A further conference,

'Women and Luxury', was held in conjunction with the project at the University of Warwick in 1999, co-sponsored by the Warwick Luxury Project (director Maxine Berg; research fellow Elizabeth Eger); and a symposium, 'Feminist Genealogies', was organised by project associates from the University of California, Los Angeles, Felicity Nussbaum, Anne Mellor, and Lynn Hunt, and held at the Clark Library in Los Angeles in 2001.

With the termination of the Leverhulme grant in the summer of 2001, the project converted into the Gender and Enlightenment Research Network, which has since run further colloquia on Enlightened masculinities, gender and Enlightened utopias, and Enlightenment and religion. A website for the network was set up and run by Sarah Knott with the help of Amy Lawson (Teaching and Learning with Technology) at Indiana University. Throughout the life of the project, an open research seminar has also been convened (by Barbara Taylor, Sarah Knott, Michèle Cohen, and Arianne Chernock, at different times) at the Institute of Historical Research in London, which is still ongoing. Timely support for writing the introduction, in a congenial setting, came from the Institute of Advanced Study at Indiana University.

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General Introduction

Sarah Knott and Barbara Taylor

In 1794, in her history of the French Revolution, Mary Wollstonecraft depicted her times as a battleground between the forces of prejudice and Enlightenment: the ‘narrow opinions of superstition’ versus ‘the enlightened sentiments of masculine and improved philosophy’.¹ And it is an exponent and practitioner of Enlightenment that Wollstonecraft now appears in most scholarly accounts. Virtually every study of her intellectual career published in the last quarter-century presents her as a quintessentially Enlightened thinker: a guise that has enhanced her reputation while at the same time plunging her into fierce intellectual controversy. If Enlightenment philosophy was ‘masculine’ – as many modern critics would characterise it and she herself denominated it – why would a feminist identify with it?² ‘Vigorous minds,’ Mary Hays wrote in her obituary of Wollstonecraft, ‘are with difficulty restrained within the trammels of authority; a spirit of enterprise, a passion for experiment; a liberal curiosity, urges them to quit beaten paths, to explore untried ways, to burst the fetters of prescription, and to acquire wisdom by an individual experience’.³ As an evocation of the eighteenth-century spirit of ‘innovation’ this can scarcely be bettered; but did Enlightenment itself encourage such iconoclasm in women, or was Wollstonecraft’s rights-of-women radicalism too bold even for enlightened opinion? What did Enlightenment offer to a pioneer feminist?

Forty years ago, when Enlightenment was the prerogative of a few, mostly French, apostles of truth – Peter Gay’s ‘little flock of *philosophes*’ – such questions did not arise. But over recent decades, as Enlightenment has expanded to encompass intellectual communities across most of eighteenth century Europe and parts of the Americas, women have steadily pressed forward. The *Blackwell Companion to the Enlightenment* (1991) contains entries on many women writers, while recent anthologies by David Williams (1999), and Dena Goodman and Kathleen Wellman (2004) include extracts from works by Wollstonecraft, Louise D’Epinay and Olympe de Gouges. The index of the Oxford University Press’s four-volume *Encyclopedia of the Enlightenment* (2003) contains scores of references to women and women’s rights. Dorinda Outram’s excellent short synthesis, *The Enlightenment* (1995), devotes a chapter to Enlightenment thinking about gender, as does the late Roy Porter’s study of British Enlightenment (2000), which locates Wollstonecraft’s feminism in a general trend toward sexual liberalisation and pays tribute to Wollstonecraft and William Godwin as ‘the Enlightenment’s premier husband-and-wife team’. And Margaret Jacob – one of Enlightenment feminism’s most consistent defenders – in her brief history of Enlightenment (2001), has put debates over female education at the heart of the enlightened intellectual agenda.⁴

We could give many more examples in this vein, to say nothing of the dozens of recent books and articles by feminist scholars examining individual women writers of enlightened outlook, or tracing changes in gender attitudes from the mid-seventeenth to the late eighteenth century. All this is certainly very encouraging, yet it also poses some challenging questions about Enlightenment and its legacies.

Enlightenment is contentious. Once an age of reason, tolerance and emancipation, today it is routinely characterised as repressive and incipiently totalitarian: a ‘conspiracy of dead white men in periwigs to provide the intellectual foundation for Western imperialism’, in Eric Hosbawn’s satiric formulation.⁵ Its record on women is indicted, with leading *philosophes* damned as misogynists in new dress while women who affirm enlightened values – like Wollstonecraft – are condemned for colluding with the oppressor.⁶ Meanwhile champions of Enlightenment vigorously defend its progressive credentials, including its record on gender issues. Pointing to powerful French *salonnières*, to enlightened panegyrics to ‘female influence’, and to radical-enlightened women’s-rights arguments, pro-Enlightenment scholars depict a movement that was positive about women in theory and generous toward them in practice.⁷ On this reading, it is easy to see why a feminist like Wollstonecraft would have found Enlightenment congenial: but is the reading accurate?

Taking our cue from such questions, and drawing on the deliberations of the London-based ‘Feminism and Enlightenment’ research project, this book explores the relationship between Enlightenment and feminism via a multi-faceted examination of the gender dimension of Enlightenment thought and practice.⁸ No attempt has been made to impose a common ‘line’, but the book’s bias is evident, with the anti-Enlightenment position finding little support among contributors.⁹ Nor, however, does the pro position receive unqualified endorsement. Viewed from the perspective of modern gender attitudes, there is indeed much in Enlightenment thinking about women that appears wrong-headed and prejudicial. The distance separating the present from the past makes such critical assessments inevitable; yet it is important not to rush to judgement. Many of the themes explored below have never before been systematically investigated. Thus rather than merely adjudicating between existing views of Enlightenment, it is our hope that this volume will encourage fresh perspectives on this old, still challenging terrain.

Did Enlightenment exist? Doubts have been expressed. ‘Like many other scholars,’ J. B. Schneewind writes in his magisterial *The Invention of Autonomy* (1998), ‘I ... do not find it helpful to think in terms of a single movement of Enlightenment ... still less of anything that might be called a single project involving all those who claimed to be enlightened’.¹⁰ Opinions were so diverse, so strongly inflected by intellectual environments and antecedent traditions, that to imagine a unitary Enlightenment seems fatuous. At one level this is clearly right. Indeed, a focus on the gender element in Enlightenment – where ideas were not just disparate but often directly opposed – underlines the point. Yet when we examine these ideas, their spokespeople and media, on a wide, comparative basis,

as this book does, we find not a babel of contending voices but a world of interlocking influences and intellectual exchanges, an international network of advanced minds where, for example, a reformist argument about female education propounded by a minor French academician in 1772 could find its way, barely a year later, into a two-volume Scottish essay on women, and from there migrate (unacknowledged) into a 1775 issue of the *Pennsylvania Magazine*.¹¹ Not a monolithic Enlightenment, then, but a powerful movement of innovatory thought and practice whose tributaries and counter-currents demand, and here receive, no less attention than its would-be orthodoxies.

Like the 'Feminism and Enlightenment' project from which it derives, this book is international in scope. The main focus is Franco-British, but with contributions on concurrent developments in Italy, Spain, and the young United States. (Germany is a major omission, and further research would almost certainly have taken us into Eastern Europe and the southern Americas.) The time-frame also is broad, reaching back to seventeenth-century Cartesian feminism and forward to women's rights in the early American republic. The term 'feminism' did not come into use until the end of the nineteenth century – long after the Seneca Falls Declaration of the Rights of Woman, let alone the revolutionary-era treatises of Wollstonecraft and De Gouges – but its deployment here is justified given the existence at the time what was dubbed the 'defence' or 'championship' of women: a loosely pro-woman position encompassing a wide range of arguments and rhetorical strategies, from hagiographies of female worthies, to fierce sex-war diatribes in the tradition of the *querelle des femmes*, to well-rehearsed demands for improvements in female education. Early modern champions of women were not movement-builders, they did not league together or publish manifestos; but this does not mean they lacked cultural influence. Indeed, by the late seventeenth century, as this book demonstrates, pro-women sentiment was an acknowledged (if not always reputable) feature of progressive opinion.

Where were enlightened women and their supporters to be found? Enlightenment was a living world where ideas were conveyed not only through 'high' philosophical works but also through novels, poetry, advice literature, popular theology, journalism, pornography, and that most fluid of eighteenth-century genres, the 'miscellaneous essay'.¹² Women made a major contribution to many of these genres, particularly advice literature and the novel, while beyond the authorial scene many more women were to be found practising Enlightenment in less conspicuous ways. Conversation, reading (both private and communal), pedagogy: these were media of Enlightenment as much as the printed text, and ones moreover deemed particularly suitable for women, whose refined tastes and improving cultural influence were key motifs of Enlightenment thought.¹³

Women as enlightened essayists, novelists, scientists, salonnières, teachers, translators, moral didacts, theologians, poets, philosophers – that is, as enlight-

ened subjects in their own right – are therefore a key focus of this volume. But it was as *objects* of intellectual discourse that women loomed largest in Enlightenment, for reasons that have hitherto been under-explored but here receive sustained and detailed treatment. A number of themes stand out. First is the centrality of Woman to the civilisation paradigm that shaped both the famed optimism and the dark underside of Enlightenment. Often assumed to have been a marginal concern for Enlightenment theorists, the status of women was treated by most leading *philosophes* as a key barometer of social ‘improvement’. Philosophical history in particular placed much emphasis on respect for women as an index of civilised progress, while moral and educational theory focussed on women’s influence as a prime factor in the making of a polite, enlightened citizenry: ideas that were to prove vitally important to feminist theorists like Wollstonecraft, Hays and Condorcet.¹⁴

The cosmopolitanism of Enlightenment is also a central motif. Enlightenment ideas and personnel crisscrossed national boundaries constantly, taking with them revisionary ideas about women and gender relations. Translation practices; the transnational circulation of texts and epistolary exchanges; philosophical travels, both armchair and actual: all were crucial factors in the communication of pro-women arguments across the Enlightenment orbit.¹⁵

Perhaps the most revisionary theme of this volume, or certainly the one that most starkly contradicts standard views of Enlightenment, is the centrality of religious discourses to enlightened debates about gender. In Catholic as well as in Protestant settings, religion was a key site of enlightened discussion over women’s status and entitlements, while women’s own involvement in religious controversy, particularly in nonconformist churches in Britain and America, was important in shaping attitudes to female intellectualism. Taking religion seriously, as all enlightened minds did, requires us to reformulate some of our too-easy alignments of the secular with the progressive, and to rethink our views on what constitutes a properly feminist mentality.¹⁶

A focus on belief opens up into wider issues about enlightened selfhood. Ideas about the self and personal identity underwent some dramatic changes during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Enlightenment psychology, medicine and moral philosophy posited new types of men and women, in whom gender and its psychic effects were imagined very differently from the past. The man of feeling and the woman of sensibility – vividly personified by Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Germaine de Staël’s fictional Corinne – became key types, enacting enlightened versions of masculinity and femininity. The similarity between these figures, their shared emotional and ideational profile, triggered divergent reactions in contemporaries: to some marking the birth of a brave new gender order, to others a sexist retreat from Enlightenment’s promise of universality rationality, to yet others a threat to psycho-social stability. These varying attitudes in turn had profound consequences for how both sexes were viewed politically, particularly during the decades of revolutionary upheaval. Could creatures of feeling be enlightened citizens? In an age of political transformation, might gender too be revolutionised?¹⁷

Britain's most intransigent Enlighteners, the radical writers of the late eighteenth century – Wollstonecraft, Catharine Macaulay, William Godwin, Mary Hays, *et al.* – were also the most revisionary in their attitudes toward women. The links between Enlightenment, political radicalism, and feminism are some of the most difficult for modern scholars to trace, given the cataclysmic events separating the mental world of the 1790s from that of preceding decades. The eruption of feminism onto the political stage during the revolutionary age is such a critical moment in women's history that it has tended to obscure antecedent developments. But what one 1793 journalist dubbed 'the new field of the Rights of Woman' had long roots in enlightened thought and cultural practices.¹⁸ Exploring these issues, the volume ends where this introduction began, with the dawning of feminism at the twilight of Enlightenment, and the legacies of this conjunction for modern western thought.

Enlightened feminism in the 1790s was as convivial as it was iconoclastic. Mary Wollstonecraft and her radical associates loved to talk and argue, and allotted much time to these pursuits. Week after week, these women and men would meet, often in the home of Wollstonecraft's publisher Joseph Johnson, to hammer out their new-world philosophy. The etiquette for these occasions was strictly egalitarian: as all present were deemed to possess reason, so all were entitled to the free expression of reasoned opinion, whatever their sex, education or social position. Women's right to converse on the same terms as men was assumed, and – if the lively exchanges recorded in William Godwin's diary and correspondence are any indication – vigorously exploited.

Subsequent radicalisms have displayed similar enthusiasm for open, non-hierarchical discussion. Second-wave feminism, where many of those involved in the 'Feminism and Enlightenment' project cut their intellectual teeth, was even more uncompromising in its commitment to intellectual democracy than 1790s radicalism. During the fifteen-plus years of Women's Liberation, a host of educational forums – study groups, day-schools, evening classes, conferences – mushroomed, usually with little or no formal institutional support. The ethos of these gatherings was fiercely egalitarian: all participants were to be heard and respected, without regard for intellectual credentials. Expertise, where it existed, was to be freely shared. Discussion in these settings was usually well-informed and rigorous, and the results can be seen all around us today, having remoulded much of our contemporary thinking.

The integration of women's history – now more often gender history – into twenty-first-century universities may seem to make such extra-institutional initiatives redundant. Yet this integration has been at a cost. Competitive pressure inside and between the universities has worked against the collaborationist ethos. Conferences today are often talent contests, showcasing star scholars while junior scholars struggle to make their mark. The sense of communal endeavour that characterised the engaged scholarship of the 1970s –

and the 1790s – is much diminished. The ‘Feminism and Enlightenment’ project was designed with the aim of re-stimulating such collaborative practices. The realisation of this ambition in its colloquia and other discussion forums, thanks to its research associates, was its first achievement; this book is its second.

The book is organised into two parts. Part One, ‘Women, Men and Enlightenment’ examines theoretical developments related to gender – with special emphasis on the revisionary content of Enlightenment history and pedagogy – and the role claimed by women intellectuals, testing what Karen O’Brien terms the ‘self-conscious gender progressivism’ of Enlightenment. Part II, ‘Feminism, Enlightenment, and Revolution’ investigates the contribution of Enlightenment principles to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century feminism and the impact of late eighteenth-century national, revolutionary and democratic politics on enlightened feminist demands and aspirations. A pair of conclusions reflect the two sides of the feminist–Enlightenment connection: the first from the perspective of Enlightenment historiography; the second through the lens of modern feminist philosophy.

Notes

1. Mary Wollstonecraft, *An Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution*, 1794, in M. Butler and J. Todd, eds, *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1989), vol. 6, pp. 6–7.
2. Wollstonecraft’s positive use of ‘masculine’ was common among eighteenth-century women writers, to whom it indicated virtues – strength, resilience, potency – characterising superior minds of both sexes. For further discussion of this, see Barbara Taylor, *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 48–51.
3. Mary Hays, ‘Memoirs of Mary Wollstonecraft’, *The Annual Necrology*, 1797–1798 (1800), p. 411.
4. Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: The Rise of Modern Paganism* (New York and London: Norton, 1966), ch. 1; John W. Yolton *et al.*, *The Blackwell Companion to the Enlightenment* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991); David Williams, ed., *The Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Dena Goodman and Kathleen Wellman, eds, *The Enlightenment* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2004); A C Kors, ed., *Encyclopedia of the Enlightenment*, four vols (Oxford University Press, 2003); Dorinda Outram, *The Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Roy Porter, *Enlightenment: Britain and the Creation of the Modern World* (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 4; Margaret Jacob, *The Enlightenment: A Brief History With Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St Martin’s, 2001). See also Isaac Kramnick, ed., *The Portable Enlightenment Reader* (New York: Penguin, 1995), pp. 560–628; Hans Erick Bodeker and Lieselotte Steinbrugge (eds), *Conceptualising Woman in Enlightenment Thought* (Berlin: Berlin Verlag, 2001), and Siep Stuurman, *François Poulain de la Barre and the Invention of Modern Equality* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003).
5. Eric Hobsbawm, *On History* (1997; London: Abacus Books, 1998), p. 336. For an excellent discussion of counter-Enlightenment from the 1780s to the present, including recent feminist criticism of Enlightenment, see Lynn Hunt and Margaret Jacob, ‘Enlightenment Studies’, in Kors, *Encyclopedia of Enlightenment*, 4: 418–430.
6. For negative evaluations of Wollstonecraft as an Enlightenment thinker see, *inter alia*, Timothy J. Reiss, ‘Revolution in Bounds: Wollstonecraft, Women and Reason’, in L Kauffman, ed., *Gender and Theory* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), Moira Gatens, ‘The

Oppressed State of My Sex”: Wollstonecraft on Reason, Feeling and Equality’, in M. L. Shanley and C. Pateman, *Feminist Interpretations and Political Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), pp. 6–128; Joan Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988).

7. For such positive evaluations, see the works by Porter and Jacob listed above, and also Dena Goodman, *The Republic of Letters: a Cultural History of the French Enlightenment* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), chs 2–4; Pauline Johnson, ‘Feminism and the Enlightenment’, *Radical Philosophy* 63, 1993; Kate Soper, ‘Naked Human Nature and the Draperies of Custom’ in Eileen Yeo (ed.) *Mary Wollstonecraft and 200 Years of Feminism* (London: Rivers Oram, 1997), pp. 207–221; Jonathan I Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650–1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), ch. 4; Karen Offen, *European Feminisms, 1700–1950* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), pp. 27–30.
8. For the original agenda of the project and a mid-way assessment, see Barbara Taylor, ‘Feminism and Enlightenment 1650–1850’, *History Workshop Journal* 47 (1999), 261–72; Sarah Knott, Mónica Bolufer Peruga, Jenny Mander, Nicholas Phillipson, Vivien Jones, Siep Stuurman and Barbara Taylor, ‘Considering “Feminism and Enlightenment”’, *Women: A Cultural Review* 12 (2001), 236–48. See also the preface to this volume.
9. For a fuller discussion of this, see Kate Soper’s conclusion to this volume.
10. J. B. Schneewind, *The Invention of Autonomy: A History of Modern Moral Philosophy* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 8. For further discussion of this, see Dror Wahrman’s introduction to Section 3 of this volume, and John Robertson’s conclusion. For further discussion of this, see Dror Wahrman’s introduction to Section 3 of this volume, and John Robertson’s conclusion.
11. For exactly this trajectory, see Mary Catherine Moran, ‘The Progress of Women’, *History Workshop Journal*, 59, spring 2005.
12. See, for example, Robert Darnton, *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime* (Harvard University Press, 1982); Roy Porter, *Enlightenment*, ch. 4; Carla Hesse, *The Other Enlightenment: How French Women Became Modern* (Princeton University Press, 2001), John Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (HarperCollins, 1997), part 2; Norma Clarke, *The Rise and Fall of the Woman of Letters* (Pimlico, 2004); Elizabeth Eger et al. (eds), *Women, Writing, and the Public Sphere, 1730–1830* (Cambridge, 2000); Thomas Munck, *The Enlightenment* (Arnold, 2000), chs 3–5.
13. See, for example, Lawrence E. Klein, ‘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 University Press, 1993); John Dwyer, *Virtuous Discourse: Sensibility and Community in Late Eighteenth-Century Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1987); Clarke, *Rise and Fall*; Goodman, *Republic of Letters*; Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (trans. Thomas Burger, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989); Sylvia Harcstack Myers, *The Bluestocking Circle: Women, Friendship, and the Life of the Mind in Eighteenth-Century England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990); Ann B. Shteir, *Cultivating Women, Cultivating Science: Flora’s Daughters and Botany in England, 1760–1860* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).
14. These issues are discussed in the essays below by Moran, Taylor, Sebastiani, Tomaselli, and Mander.
15. For these issues, see especially the essays by Mander, Findlen, Orr, Peruga, Gordon, and Knott.
16. The religious dimension of Enlightenment thinking on women is explored in Section 7.
17. For these issues, see the essays in Sections 3 and 9.
18. *Critical Review*, 4 (1792), p. 390.

Part I

Women, Men, Enlightenment

SECTION 1 SEXUAL DISTINCTIONS AND PRESCRIPTIONS

Introduction

Karen O'Brien

The issue of the 'distinction of sex' was central to the Enlightenment attempt to understand the role of women in contemporary society, yet it was also one of the areas of most fundamental disagreement. On the one hand, the period from the mid-eighteenth to the early nineteenth centuries witnessed the development of a medical science which emphasised the enormous extent of physiological and psychological difference between men and women. On the other hand, Enlightenment sociologists dwelled upon the greater social and intellectual convergence between the sexes brought about by historical progress. Radical thinkers like Mary Wollstonecraft were suspicious of this idea of convergence, seeing it as a form of managed and veiled inequality; her wish was to see the distinction of sex altogether 'confounded' in society as far as biologically possible. Debates over the social convergence and natural differences between the sexes were themselves versions of the old question about the extent to which woman was to be understood primarily as a natural or as a social category, and they had a particularly pronounced effect on attitudes towards women's intellectual endeavours. All three of the articles in this section explore the tension between the naturalist and sociological tendencies of Enlightenment gender debate with this question of women's intellectual potential to the fore.

Anne C. Vila's essay on 'Marginality, Melancholy and the Learned Woman' explores the trend, in later eighteenth-century France, towards pathologising, rather than simply ridiculing, the learned woman. This trend stemmed from a long established suspicion of isolated, monkish scholars; a suspicion which, although particularly acute in the female case, was often extended to male writers. Male *philosophes* responded by rebranding themselves as 'hommes de bien', practically minded, socially aware intellectuals. This earlier parity of (dis)esteem for male and female intellectuals was complicated, in the late eighteenth century, by the rise of the dimorphic physiological model of human nature, one which emphasised the particular unfitness of the female constitution for mental labour. If women's intellectual activity had often been regarded in the past as a distraction from their domestic and social duties, it was now also seen as a deviation from their biological nature, one which could lead to all sorts of undesirable medical symptoms. Male intellectuals, even rebranded

ones, were not exempt from similar accusations of physical debility, but they, at least, attracted compensatory ascriptions of troubled 'genius'. It is in the context of these medicalised discourses of intellect and genius that Vila reinterprets Germaine de Stael's novel *Corinne* (1807), and revisits the vexed question of Stael's gender politics. Vila argues that Corinne, the eponymous heroine and artistic genius of the novel, conforms to the type of melancholic male genius which Stael had first identified in Rousseau. Although female, Corinne is exempted by Stael from the usual pathologies of female artists, and diagnosed instead as possessing a highly exceptional, non-gender specific genius syndrome – the very syndrome which caused Rousseau so much inward suffering. Read this way, the melancholic, brilliant Corinne can be seen, not as an admonitory figure for female artistic or intellectual endeavour, nor yet as a shining example of women's artistic potential. She is, rather, an explosive, ultimately tragic combination of ordinary femininity and genius.

Vila gives a persuasive and expert reading of Stael's novel as a work which leaves early nineteenth-century gender categories undisturbed, whilst nevertheless presenting a sensationally female embodiment of contemporary medical accounts of the nature of genius. Vila's reading necessarily sidesteps the more sociological aspects of Stael's work, and in particular the links made between Corinne's melancholy and the national characteristics which come from her dual English and Italian heritage. For the novel also contains a strangely pathologised reading of national character and national liberty as it is allegorised in the character of Corinne's English lover Lord Nelvil and in the contradictory Anglo-Italian figure of Corinne herself. This side of the novel is insightfully explored in Caroline Franklin's chapter on 'Gender Roles and Post-Revolutionary Patriotism'. If Nelvil partly represents the English idea of liberty embodied in law and civil order, Corinne stands for Italy as the subjugated land of art. Through the figure of Corinne, Stael deploys the Enlightenment idea of woman as the (politically disempowered) bearer of culture and civilisation, but with the radical twist that, in conditions of oppression or colonialism, her voice and actions may take on a more potent political symbolism than those of her fellow men.

An attempt to synthesise these two readings of *Corinne* would further illuminate the early nineteenth century categorical contradictions inherent in the analysis of femininity. As Stael herself commented in *On Literature* (1800), women 'belong neither to the natural nor to the social order'. We need to know more about the interaction between medical/physiological models of the feminine and moral and sociological discourse. How far was it the case, as Lieselotte Steinbrugge argued in her valuable study, *The Moral Sex: Woman's Nature in the French Enlightenment* (1992), that medical and anthropological models of innate female difference shaped and dominated the social and historical understanding of femininity? The relationship between these different spheres of discourse is no more straightforward than in our own time when socio-biology, neuroscience and genetics have offer us sharply differentiated accounts of male and female nature which have nevertheless not substantially modified prevailing normative assumptions about the intellectual and functional equality of the sexes. The

Enlightenment, too, was wedded to a gender functionalism of sorts: one in which accounts of the nature and role of women were strongly driven by ideas about the kinds of economic, social and political function which states required of them. Montesquieu's account of the different kinds of women required by different kinds of polity is certainly the best example of this kind of functional view of femininity. Yet Rousseau, also, was as much interested in the *effects* as in the biological origins of sexual difference, and in particular in the ways in which those relatively minor innate differences could be nurtured and accentuated for the good of the political realm.

It is the tension, in Enlightenment thinking, between functionalist and biologically essentialist ideas of femininity which placed the conduct book on the front line of gender debate. A person offering advice to women in this format had to negotiate between what he or she thought a woman was, and what society required of her. In her chapter 'Between the Savage and the Civil', Mary Catherine Moran gives an illuminating account of a best-selling conduct book, John Gregory's *A Father's Legacy to his Daughters* (1774). Known to most of us principally through Mary Wollstonecraft's excoriating attack in her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, the work's real originality and significance becomes clear in Moran's balanced assessment. She reveals its roots, not only the conduct book tradition, but in the Scottish Enlightenment science of man. Gregory, as well as being a Scottish moralist and concerned parent, was also himself something of a natural historian of the human species. What lay behind his advice and prescriptions was a naturalistic account of the progress of man from savagery to refinement. For him, women were both the embodiment of the natural against which the evolution of man might be measured, and the repository of civilisation. There is a palpable tension in Gregory's work between what Moran describes as the 'simultaneous naturalization and historicization of the female sex', and his concern with the loss of naturalness entailed by the civilising process. Although Gregory does not advocate a return to man's 'natural' state of society, he frequently invokes the natural as the yardstick for some of civilisation's worst distortions: the straight-lacing of women, for example, or the swaddling of infants. Gregory's double perception of civilisation as, at once, a partial distortion and also a positive effect of the natural energy and sociability of women lies behind the infuriating contradictoriness of his advice to his daughters: his anxious, conventional warnings that they should mask their intelligence, ideas and desires in deference to public suspicion of women of 'great parts and [...] cultivated understanding', and his insistence that they should nevertheless remain true to their natural feelings.

If Gregory's work exemplifies the 'paradoxes involved in the Enlightenment depiction of woman as both the embodiment of the natural and the repository of civilisation', Wollstonecraft's writing attempts to show how those very paradoxes stem from a covert and concerted male attack on even the remote possibility of female equality. In her chapter on 'Feminists versus Gallants: Manners and Morals in Enlightenment Britain', Barbara Taylor explores a particular bugbear of Wollstonecraft, male 'gallantry', in a way which greatly illuminates her sophisticated

critique of broader Enlightenment ideas of femininity. In the later eighteenth century, gallantry, as Taylor rightly points out, represented, not the old-fashioned, patronising courtesy of older men towards young women, but a modernised set of rules for sexual interaction. Dismissed by Shaftesbury and other commentators in the early eighteenth century as French, foppish and effeminate, the notion was rehabilitated by the mid-century by philosophers such as David Hume who declared it (of all things) 'natural in the highest degree'. Gallantry acquired new historical burnish from the 1770s, according to Taylor, when it became associated with the system of deference to the virtue, modesty and superior moral sensitivity of the ladies known as 'chivalry'. The qualities deferred to took on an increasingly normative aspect; social, domestic and religious sensitivities elicited male esteem; erudition and argumentativeness broke the rules of chivalrous engagement. Taylor cites James Fordyce's brother David as a Scottish example of the growing contemporary hostility towards bookish women, a hostility which, as Jane Rendall shows in her chapter on later eighteenth- to early nineteenth-century Scotland, set the tone in the social circles of a number of the Edinburgh reviewers.

Taylor's main question is a far-reaching one: 'Why did a renovated chivalry ... achieve such ascendancy among eighteenth-century British progressives?' She concurs with the most recent historians in seeing a loosening, rather than a hardening, of gender distinctions and divisions in the late eighteenth century. She therefore interprets the new 'gallantry' as a covert backlash, an attempt to shore up traditional distinctions between the sexes by redescribing them in terms more flattering to the female sex. Wollstonecraft saw the gallantry game for what it was, as did other feminists such as Mary Hays and Helen Maria Williams. Yet, outside the scope of this essay, it is striking how many other (not easily placated or patronised) women saw possibilities and feminine resources in revived chivalry, among them Elizabeth Montagu, Susannah Dobson (the translator of seminal texts in medieval history) Clara Reeve and Hannah More. Lexically speaking it is hard to find any positive uses of the word 'gallantry' by women writers, and it never shed its connotations of Frenchified insincerity or strategic seductiveness. Yet the word chivalry was often a different matter. Chivalry, as it was understood in the later eighteenth century, embedded respect for women within a wider system of morality, public responsibility and philanthropy, and, as such, provided a language of shared social concern for both men and women. Moreover, the notion of chivalry served to complicate, and even, to some extent, disaggregate, Enlightenment narratives of progress by celebrating a gothic cultural system which had declined with the coming of the commercial age, and now stood in need of revival. The fact that, in the sphere of gender relations, chivalry was little more than gallantry masquerading as a sort of nostalgic gentlemanliness was not lost on Wollstonecraft, but the similarities between gallantry and chivalry still needed a clearer statement. In an essay of 1826, John Stuart Mill wrote, with an apparent air of discovery, that 'there is one feature in the chivalrous character which has yet to be noticed; we mean its gallantry. And that we shall think it necessary to examine more fully, because we are persuaded that nine-tenths of the admiration of chivalry are grounded upon it'. Mill goes on to

doubt openly 'whether these fopperies contributed much to the substantial happiness of women, or indicated any real solicitude for their welfare'. His dismissiveness is refreshing and iconoclastic, and clearly presented as such. Looking back from this point, it enables us to see how far Wollstonecraft was ahead of her time in seeing that the self-conscious gender progressivism of the Enlightenment was never more insidious than when decked out in historical costume. She would certainly have appreciated Lucy Aikin's warning, in her *Epistles on Women* (1810): 'Learn, thoughtless woman, learn his arts to scan,/ And dread that fearful portent, kneeling man!' Wollstonecraft could not have foreseen the extent to which, in the following century, a new ceremonious, deferential, patronising tone in men's address to women would take on a self-consciously English character, or the ways in which that historical costume would become, in the following century, a kind of national dress. But she would have been appalled.

1.1

Between the Savage and the Civil: Dr John Gregory's Natural History of Femininity

Mary Catherine Moran

Professor [Adam] Ferguson told me that he was present the second time Dr. Gregory attended the Poker [Club], when, enlarging on his favourite topic, the superiority of the female sex, he was so laughed at and run down that he never returned.

(Alexander Carlyle, *Autobiography of Alexander Carlyle of Inveresk, 1722–1805*¹)

Dr John Gregory's *A Father's Legacy to His Daughters* was easily the best-selling female conduct book of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, both in Britain and America. First published posthumously in March 1774, the work was an immediate and enduring success, selling 6000 copies between 1774 and 1776 alone,² and running through scores of reprints well into the nineteenth century, with an edition published as late as 1877. It was frequently excerpted in periodicals and miscellanies, was often published alongside Hester Chapone's *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind* (1773), and sometimes served as a companion piece to Lord Chesterfield's *Letters to His Son* (1774). The *Legacy* also ran through dozens of American editions and was translated into French, Italian and Russian. It is little wonder, then, that the London-based (but Scottish-born) printer William Strahan might view the success of the work as something of a standard, against which it would be unreasonable to hold everything that he and his partners published: commenting on the disappointing sales of another book, Strahan reminded his Edinburgh partner William Creech that, 'We cannot expect everything to fly like Gregory's *Legacy*'.³ Nor is it surprising, given this enormous popularity, that the *Legacy* is now seen as the paradigmatic eighteenth-century female conduct book: Gregory is frequently mentioned in passing as a typical eighteenth-century moralist, while his *Legacy* is often cited briefly or parenthetically as an obvious example of the period's conventional pieties surrounding women and gender.

If Gregory's *Legacy* is most often invoked as a byword for conservative male didacticism, those who have looked more closely at the text tend to characterize it as a 'seemingly' liberal and enlightened work. Compared with James Fordyce's *Sermons to Young Women* (1765), writes Janet Todd, Gregory's *Legacy*

'seems positively enlightened. His tone is less assured, his attitude less complacent'. Yet Gregory's 'seeming enlightenment', she continues, 'only goes so far, and he is soon referring to women's "natural softness and sensibility"'.⁴ For Vivien Jones, to cite another example, the point of comparison is Thomas Gisborne's *Enquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex* (1797): 'Compared with Gisborne's stern Evangelicalism, Gregory seems to represent a liberal and enlightened version of masculinity'. But if Gregory's view of women initially 'seems almost Wollstonecraftian', argues Jones, 'his assumptions about sexual difference begin to undermine the egalitarian implications of "companions and equals"', for instead of viewing women as equals, Gregory sees them as 'designed to soften our hearts and polish our manners'.⁵ Beneath its seeming enlightenment, then, the work reveals a less than liberal concern to define and demarcate a properly female nature.

This chapter places the 'seemingly enlightened' *Legacy* within the context of the Enlightenment's interest in the role of women in the natural history of the species. More specifically, I seek to demonstrate that the *Legacy's* assumptions about female nature are best understood when placed alongside the account of human nature that Gregory offered in his earlier *Comparative View of the State and Faculties of Man with Those of the Animal World* (1765). Gregory himself asserted the link between the two works when, in the Preface to his *Legacy*, he referred his daughters to 'a little treatise of mine just published'. In this 'little treatise' (that is, the lengthy *Comparative View*), Gregory explains, he had already outlined 'your natural character and place in society', from which 'there arises a certain propriety of conduct peculiar to your sex' that is the immediate concern of the *Legacy*.⁶ Gregory's own understanding of the connection between his two works points us toward an important Enlightenment context that has largely been obscured by the tendency to interpret the remarkable proliferation of writings on female conduct as a relatively minor chapter in the history of the rise of the novel. Recovering this context, I will argue, requires attending to Gregory's engagement with Enlightenment accounts of human progress, his reliance on Scottish Enlightenment theories of sociability and his anxiety over the threat of Enlightenment scepticism.

By interpreting Gregory's notion of female nature in light of his account of the natural history of species, this chapter proposes that Gregory considered the female sex as the human standard against which to measure the progress of man. My aim here is not to recuperate Gregory as a proto-feminist, for Gregory's belief in the superior humanity of women did not imply any sort of commitment to granting them legal and political equality. Instead, I want to highlight some of the paradoxes involved in the Enlightenment depiction of woman as both the embodiment of the natural and the repository of civilization. The association of women with nature is of course an ancient one: according to a conception that can be traced back to Aristotle, it is the identification of the female with the natural which marks women as inferior, for it is precisely the extent to which he escapes from the realm of necessity that man is fully human. The association of women with civilization, on the other hand, was an eighteenth-century idea, the