

Huguette Krief, Marie-Emmanuelle Plagnol-Diéval, Michèle Crogiez Labarthe, Édith Flamarion (dir.), Femmes des Lumières. Recherches en arborescences, Paris (Classiques Garnier) 2018, 398 p. (Rencontres, 309. Le dix-huitième siècle, 22), ISBN 978-2-406-06388-9, EUR 46,00.

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According to the introductory essay of *Femmes des Lumières* (p. 7–20), the most useful analogy for the display of »recent archival discoveries, new connections, and questions« in the field of women’s intellectual endeavour during the period of eighteenth-century European history commonly labeled as »the Enlightenment«, is that of a tree. Continuing this metaphor, therefore, this review will ask three main questions. Firstly, what are the main branches, or themes, of this collection? Secondly, what is the reach and calibre of the individual articles hanging from these boughs? And finally, how far do these leaves and branches coalesce into a clear, trunk-like argument that ties the individual elements of the work together? I will conclude that while the spread of individual articles is impressive, the quality of the chapters vary; and that although the volume triumphantly succeeds in showing the breadth of intellectual activities in which women engaged over the course of the 18th century, it fails to demonstrate why historians more generally, and not just scholars of gender, need to take the female contribution to the Enlightenment seriously.

Femmes des Lumières is organized around three main branches, with each part aiming to demonstrate a different aspect of 18th-century female intellectual activity. The first section, »Regards de femmes«, seeks to show how women elaborated ideas which were increasingly autonomous from the systems of thought that surrounded them. The second, »Engagements de femmes«, explores the hierarchy of genres of intellectual production. It demonstrates how women both remained within the »female« sphere of endeavour, and also sought to test the boundaries that kept them from producing types of literature that were seen as constituting an exclusively male domain. The final part is »Carrières de femmes«, which presents various women intellectuals of the 18th century whose careers are seen as particularly significant.

Although this fact is not explicitly signaled in the volume, the geographical scope of the articles that make up these three parts is confined to France, with two exceptions: Beatriz Onandia’s contribution, »La fortune littéraire des pédagogues françaises dans l’Espagne des Lumières« (p. 199–214), which nonetheless focuses on the reception of a French author, Mme de Genlis, in late 18th and early 19th-century Spain; and Valéry Cossy’s fascinating study of the multiple ways in which Isabelle de Charrière, a Dutch *philosophe* who married a Swiss man and wrote in French,



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presented herself, and the importance of the various dissonances that defined her identity for the work that she produced (p. 63–86).

Within this limited geography, however, the chronological range of topics is impressive: hailing from the late 17th century with Éleine Itti's study of the philologue and Latin translator Anne Le Fèvre Dacier (p. 229–240); and reaching several decades into the 19th century with Francesco Schiariti's »La fiction historique féminine au tournant des Lumières« (p. 293–308) and Laurence Vanoflen's exploration of the textual changes that occurred in different editions of the novels of Adélaïde de Souza (p. 309–322).

The spread of articles also succeeds in demonstrating that the women of the Enlightenment cannot be placed in a particular ideological box: Rotraud von Kulesa in particular argues convincingly for looking at the question of the Enlightenment *au pluriel*, and as encompassing both the work of the staunch Catholic Marie Leprince de Beaumont and the anticlerical literature of Françoise de Graffigny (p. 277–292). This article nicely compliments the earlier chapter by Ramona Herz-Gazeau on Beaumont's Christianity and its relationship to her interpretation of Stoic philosophy, as demonstrated by her re-writing of the English work »History of Fidelia« (p. 49–62).

Alongside this range of topics, however, a definite variation in the quality of the articles can be discerned. The least convincing chapters tend towards simply presenting a vignette of »a woman who thought about a thing«, with little attempt to demonstrate the intellectual or cultural context of her ideas, or to indicate why this particular woman or this particular thought is historically significant. It is hard to grasp the purpose, for example, of Frédéric Marty's contribution on Louise Dupin's unpublished »Ouvrage sur les femmes« (1740) (p. 87–99). Here, he compares and contrasts Dupin's work with the »Encyclopédie« article »Femme« (1756), without positing any real historical connection between the two texts, or indicating why a comparison between the two is useful. Similarly, Édith Flamarion's chapter on Octavia Belot's refutation of Rousseau's »Discourse on Inequality« (p. 37–47), while interesting, does not successfully put Belot's work in greater context. This reader is thus left wondering how original Belot's attack on Rousseau was, and whether it had a broader impact on the reception of Rousseau more generally.

Indeed, *Femmes des Lumières* as a whole inspires the feeling of being led down a fascinating path, and then abandoned just before the final destination is reached. A concluding essay, in which the areas of agreement and dissent that are to be found in the chapters are reflected upon, is badly needed, if one is to draw any overarching conclusions about the position and activities of women intellectuals in 18th-century France. Should the insistence that characterizes the third part in particular, that the women under consideration were the exception rather than the rule – Marie-Laure Girou Swiderski (p. 241–256), for example, insists that the life of Mme d'Arconville represents »une carrière féminine hors du commun« – be taken to mean that no broader culture of female intellectual activity existed? How does the theme of the second section, which focuses primarily on groups of women rather than individuals, and seeks, as Françoise Gevrey's contribution



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on female authors of *contes* (p. 185–198) demonstrates, to show similarities in the way women intellectuals acted, contradict these later assertions of individuality? Unfortunately, no answers to these more general questions are forthcoming. For the most part, the volume sticks too closely to the traditional methodology that characterizes the history of women intellectuals – that of providing stand-alone case studies and biographies – rather than seeking to draw more general conclusions.

If the aim of *Femmes des Lumières* is to demonstrate that women in 18th-century France were beings capable of a wide variety of ideas and activities, the volume succeeds admirably. This, in itself, is no mean feat: as the recent collection *Enquête sur la construction des Lumières* (Ferney-Voltaire, 2018), in which not a single essay examines the role of women during the Enlightenment demonstrates, female intellectual activity in this period is still astonishingly easy to ignore. If, however, *Femmes des Lumières* wishes to show that female intellectual production was an integral part of the Enlightenment, and indeed that the period cannot be understood without reference to women, it is less successful. There is still an unfortunate tendency to treat the role of women in intellectual history as an interesting, but not essential, »add-on« that can be addressed or ignored according to the mood of the historian. Sadly, this volume does little to combat this all-too prevalent attitude.



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