

**Laurence Vanoflen (dir.), Femmes et philosophie des Lumières. De l'imaginaire à la vie des idées, Paris (Classiques Garnier) 2020, 410 p. (Masculin/féminin dans l'Europe moderne, 26), ISBN 978-2-406-09598-9, EUR 43,00.**

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While academic interest in women writers and philosophers of the long eighteenth century has soared in English-language scholarship, women still play a subordinate role in Enlightenment literary history in most French academic circles. Despite some encouraging signs within the publishing world – such as the recent appearance of the »Dictionnaire des femmes des Lumières«<sup>1</sup> – in France women are often entirely absent from narratives of the Enlightenment or play only minor roles as the disciples of male *philosophes*. This collection of essays, written largely by French scholars with some international contributors, challenges the French university establishment to redress this gendered asymmetry in Enlightenment literary history.

Emanating from a 2017 colloquium, the essays attest to the sheer variety of textual modes and forms through which women participated in the intellectual debates of their age. The contributions move from the early 18<sup>th</sup> century well into the Romantic period, encompassing not only those authors who »lived« the Enlightenment but also those whose intellectual worlds were shaped by and produced in response to its central concerns, including writers like Mary Wollstonecraft and Jane Austen. Along the way, the reader is introduced to a variety of lesser-known figures, such as the unpublished but prolific Joséphine de Lorraine Armagnac, as well as many others whose texts have remained »méconnus, inédits, confondus ou mélangés avec ceux de leurs collaborateurs« (p. 13).

The collection is roughly organized along three major axes of inquiry. The first group of essays showcases the vast repertory of philosophical domains into which women entered as Enlightenment authors. Explicitly rebutting the argument, still current in some French academic circles, that there were no *femmes philosophes*, the authors explore how women's writings mirrored the philosophical concerns of their male peers, including extended meditations on the nature of the good, happiness, *amour propre*, morality, and natural law. The »cartography of subjects« pieced together in this section includes figures like Geneviève d'Arconville, who developed a natural philosophy



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<sup>1</sup> Huguette Krief, Valérie André (dir.), *Dictionnaire des femmes des Lumières*, 2 vol., Paris 2015 (*Dictionnaires & Références*, 25).

based on her experiences as a chemist, and Émilie de Châtelet, whose unpublished writings brought an Enlightenment spirit of critique to bear on Catholic dogma. Whether they wrote in essay form, as in Mme de Verzure's »Reflexions d'une femme ignorante«, or used less traditional settings, women engaged in philosophical reflections that paralleled and rivaled those of their male contemporaries.

A second theme, »Modes de participation aux Lumières«, explores the varied collaborations, practices of mediation, and forms of intellectual production through which women participated in the Enlightenment. Many authors engaged in multiple literary modes; Louise Dupin, for example, wrote everything from short moral works destined for a close circle of friends, to a collaborative refutation of »De l'esprit des lois«, to single-authored essays. Responding to cultural norms that discouraged women's intellectual work, authors often chose genres and authorial styles that offered them a measure of clandestinity and allowed them to expound on topics that were typically considered unacceptable for women.

Translations, for example, were a common entry point for women into intellectual circles, allowing women to adopt the acceptable role of cultural mediator. Authors like Mme Belot, however, made use of the paratexts surrounding their translations to intervene in contemporary debates and write philosophical commentaries on politics, censorship, and happiness. Another favored genre was the dialogue, which allowed women to insert themselves into conversation with male philosophers – as was the case of Marie Leprince de Beaumont, who quoted male authors extensively in her own written dialogues in order to refute them. Others, like Louise d'Épinay and Fanny de Beauharnais, positioned women as the authoritative interlocutors in their dialogues on topics ranging from education to the equality of the sexes.

Beyond these fictional representations, a number of essays demonstrate that women were also active collaborators with men in the production of Enlightenment texts. If previous generations of literary scholars assumed that women like Louise d'Épinay or Émilie du Châtelet wrote under the influence of the men surrounding them, Mélinna Caron argues, it is only because they fundamentally misunderstood the sociability of exchange undergirding Enlightenment intellectual production, which was based on horizontal collaborations. D'Épinay and her male writing partners, for example, intervened frequently in each other's texts, editing and appropriating each other's arguments, images and ideas. Given the reciprocity and intensity of such exchanges, recuperating women's intellectual contributions to the Enlightenment will require scholars to move beyond simplistic hierarchical interpretations of literary influence or dependence.

Women philosophers constantly negotiated between their own desire to publish and the cultural imperative to show modesty, and the authorial strategies that women adopted in response to these



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cultural constraints form the final line of inquiry in this collection. Certainly, the most frequently chosen path was that of anonymity. Many attempted to legitimize their publications by adopting a modest authorial voice and by choosing genres compatible with women's social status, such as novels, pedagogical treatises, or the familiar letter.

Making such a choice, however, did not mean that women perceived themselves to be abandoning their ambition of contributing to philosophical discussions or to social progress more broadly. Mme Riccoboni, for example, defended her sentimental novels by arguing that, by cultivating empathy in the reader, novels fulfilled a more important social function than philosophical treatises. Over time, the feminine authorial voice gained confidence and a collective feminine voice began to emerge in political writing. By the end of the period, Constance de Théis, Olympe de Gouges, and Marie-Madelaine Jodin had produced decidedly feminist correctives to Enlightenment discourses on education, religion, reason, and the respective roles of the sexes.

Collectively, these essays produce a forceful and persuasive call to take women seriously as active participants in the Enlightenment. For readers well-acquainted with gender studies, many of the theoretical approaches in this collection will feel familiar; nevertheless, in reintroducing a host of feminine voices to a French audience, the authors demonstrate not only that women deserve a place within the literary history of the Enlightenment, but that attending to women can fundamentally reshape our understanding of Enlightenment literary production itself.



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