

Frédéric Marty, Louise Dupin. Défendre l'égalité des sexes en 1750, Paris (Classiques Garnier) 2021, 338 p. (L'Europe des Lumières, 73), ISBN 978-2-406-10925-9, EUR 39,00.

rezensiert von | compte rendu rédigé par
Gary Kates, Claremont, CA

This timely and well-crafted study of Louise Dupin's feminist writings will surely make her innovative ideas regarding the equality between men and women better known in Enlightenment scholarship. It is not that Louise Dupin herself has been forgotten. Rather, because of her wealth and status, she has – until recently – unfortunately been appreciated more for her beauty, ownership of the Château de Chenonceau, and her role leading a Paris salon. Frédéric Marty's important achievement consists in highlighting the serious contribution she made to Enlightenment feminism and thus to include her as a deservedly major figure in the history of ideas.

The book covers only a small portion of Dupin's long life (1706–1799), the period during the 1740s, when she wrote major feminist treatises and hired as her secretary the young and unknown Jean-Jacques Rousseau. These manuscripts, which even today have yet to be published, were dispersed in the 1950s into various archival collections from Bordeaux to Austin, Texas. They are mostly in Rousseau's hand, presumably dictated by Dupin to her secretary. The extent of his involvement, however, remains mysterious. Was Rousseau simply a silent reporter, or, was there conversation, debate, and perhaps even collaboration between them? Surely, as Marty notes, the ideas were hers and not his. Given, however, Rousseau's later notoriously reactionary ideas regarding gender (even by 18th-century standards), Dupin's manuscripts are of much interest to Rousseau scholars, who may see in his later writings a direct rebuke of Dupin's progressive notions.

Marty devotes an important chapter highlighting Dupin's »Ouvrage sur les femmes«. This large-scale work was closest in form to an epic philosophical history, not unlike Montesquieu's »De l'esprit des lois« or Adam Ferguson's »Essay on the History of Civil Society«. Partly inspired by the egalitarian ideas of late 17th-century philosopher François Poullain de la Barre, and partly by the history of notable women, who despite overwhelming misogyny, made significant contributions to European military, political, and religious history, this work was part of a burst of 18th-century feminist literature, culminating later in the century with more recognizable classics such as Mary Wollstonecraft's »Vindication of the Rights of Women« (1792). Why Dupin abandoned this cogent and already polished (if unwieldy) manuscript during the 1750s is a mystery, but certainly, 18th-century Europe was no safe space for female authors. Even publishing the work anonymously would have likely exposed her to ridicule. At any rate, Marty carefully



Herausgegeben vom Deutschen
Historischen Institut Paris |
publiée par l'Institut historique
allemand



Publiziert unter | publiée sous
[CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)

and insightfully reconstructs the cultural landscape that gave nourishment to Dupin's work.

The second major work by Dupin that Marty addresses is her own book-length refutation of Montesquieu's »De l'esprit des lois«. In 1748, only days after its original publication, Louise, her secretary Jean-Jacques Rousseau, her husband Claude, and perhaps one or two others formed a book club that systematically read through Montesquieu's new work that everyone knew was destined to become a classic. Nevertheless, the group challenged many of Montesquieu's key ideas. Central to the disagreement between the Dupins and Montesquieu was the latter's notion that virtue had little place in monarchy and that honor (self-interest) was the key principle invigorating modern government. Usually attributed to only Claude Dupin, the anonymously published »Observations sur un livre intitulé: de l'esprit des loix« (3 vol., Paris, 1750–1752) represented a collaborative effort of the Dupin circle. Separate from the group, Louise wrote her own refutation of Montesquieu's book. The key difference between the two works was that Louise's critique featured gender as a primary thematic critical tool. Tentatively entitled »Critique de l'esprit des lois«, and today found in the Bibliothèque de la municipalité de Bordeaux, Louise Dupin squarely objected to Montesquieu's treatment of women.

Fascinated by Montesquieu's notion that the status of women across the world reflected the general level of civilization, Dupin was the earliest reader we know to perceive that Montesquieu's sociology implied a direct relationship between politics and family life, that is, a correspondence between political and domestic authority. As he had illustrated with such brilliance in »Lettres persanes« (1721), the domestic manners between husband and wife were shaped by the political culture in which they resided. So, for example, in a despotism where fear pervaded royal courts, Montesquieu commented on how wives were often little more than slaves of their husbands, with few property rights or the ability to sue in a law court. Among Montesquieu's main contentions was a defense that women's liberty—their ability to control their own lives—was greatest in modern European monarchies. Even in republics, he claimed, women were limited by conservative social mores that severely limited their role in the public sphere. Only in a monarchy like France, Montesquieu argued, could honor help to free women from patriarchal social constraints and turn marital relations in a more egalitarian direction.

Dupin found Montesquieu's portrayal of women in republics and despotisms more apologetic than descriptive. She was troubled by Montesquieu's acceptance that wives outside European monarchies were normatively subordinate. Insofar as Montesquieu argued that it was natural for women to be abused in despotism, she found him complicit in the very thing he may have been attempting to criticize. Montesquieu's indirect style, his penchant for finding sociological relations, troubled Dupin because he seemed to give up on improving the lives of women who lived outside Europe, and indeed, she feared that it made European



Herausgegeben vom Deutschen
Historischen Institut Paris |
publiée par l'Institut historique
allemand



Publiziert unter | publiée sous
[CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

readers complacent about the fragile status of women in their own societies. Dupin charged Montesquieu with demeaning women through a seemingly clinical tone. He confused cause and effect, argued Dupin. Where, for example, Montesquieu seemed to blame casual sex on women, Dupin snapped back that loose sexual mores were the result of oppressive conditions that legislation imposed on women. In effect, Dupin indicted Montesquieu with foregoing universal human rights for cultural relativism.

Marty finds that Dupin's feminism informs not only Enlightenment feminism but is relevant to ongoing feminist struggles today. »En fait«, he writes, Dupin »est réformiste mais elle souhaite des réformes ambitieuses et souvent radicales« (p. 305). Like her better-known contemporary novelist Françoise de Graffigny, Marty's excellent book reminds us that modern feminism arose not in spite of – but rather because of powerful aristocrats such as Louise Dupin.



Herausgegeben vom Deutschen
Historischen Institut Paris |
publiée par l'Institut historique
allemand



Publiziert unter | publiée sous
[CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)