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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 chivarlous 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.

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