

WOMEN AND  
ENLIGHTENMENT IN  
EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY  
BRITAIN

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## *Introduction: the progress of society*

Let me observe to you, that the position of women in society, is somewhat different from what it was a hundred years ago, or as it was sixty, or I will say thirty years since. Women are now so highly cultivated, and political subjects are at present of so much importance, of such high interest, to all human beings who live together in society, you can hardly expect, Helen, that you, as a rational being, can go through the world as it now is, without forming any opinions on points of public importance. You cannot, I conceive, satisfy yourself with the common namby-pamby, little missy phrase, 'ladies have nothing to do with politics'. . . Female influence must, will, and ought to exist on political subjects as on all others; but this influence should always be domestic, not public – the customs of society have so ruled it.

(Maria Edgeworth, *Helen*, 1834)<sup>1</sup>

This is a study of the implications of the Enlightenment for women in eighteenth-century Britain. It explores the impact of the great discovery of the British Enlightenment – that there is such a thing as society, that humans are principally intelligible as social beings, and that society itself is subject to change – on both male and female writers of this period. It considers the degree to which investigations of society by Enlightenment writers were inflected, even, at times, motivated by their growing interest in women as distinct and influential social members. And it examines women as both subjects and authors of works of social enquiry in the light of the Enlightenment idea that society can progress by its own endeavour, not only economically but also in its moral relations, education and culture. The discovery of the progress of society entailed a re-evaluation of history, not simply as a series of political events and military conflicts, but as a civilising process. This re-evaluation brought with it, for the first time, the idea that women, as well as men, have a history, and that, far from being intelligible in terms of unchanging biological, scriptural or domestic roles, they too can change with changing times. Indeed, eighteenth-century writers

increasingly came to believe that the status and educational level of women in a given society were important indicators of its degree of historical progress, and a number argued that the low educational level of women in their own times was itself an impediment to further social improvement. This is not to say that the historical investigation of human sociability and the historicising of women were in themselves hospitable to what we would now call feminism: by which I mean the demand, first made at the very end of the century, for equal civil and political rights for women. But it is to say that Enlightenment philosophical and historical enquiries created a framework and a language for understanding the gendered structures of society without which nineteenth-century feminism would not have been possible. This study takes a long-range view, from the late seventeenth to the early nineteenth centuries, in order to convey the scale of this transformation. The transformation was apparent to commentators of this period themselves, as it is, for example, in the opening quotation above, to Lady Davenant, who speaks to the protagonist of Maria Edgeworth's 1834 novel *Helen* about the extraordinary increase in political and collective self-awareness that had taken place among educated women over the last hundred years, even though that increase stops somewhere short of claiming a fully political role in the life of the country.

In seeking to trace this transformation in the prominence accorded to women, and the depth of the Enlightenment engagement with them as social beings, as well as the growing confidence with which women writers themselves wrote of their own position in society, this study draws upon a variety of primary sources, some literary, some philosophical and theological, and some works of history, political economy and educational theory. In doing so, each chapter attempts to trace an evolving process of intellectual elaboration, debate and disagreement in which women are sometimes the main topic, but more often a subsidiary topic within a broader discussion of ethics, metaphysics, economics or, most frequently, 'manners' (by which the eighteenth century generally meant moral and social norms and culture). This book is less concerned with the social circulation of gendered representations in this period than with the explicit articulation of the moral, sociological and economic vocabularies through which women emerged as a distinct discursive category, and which women writers themselves deployed and refashioned in their own writings. It is, in other words, a work of intellectual rather than of cultural history, although it draws extensively upon cultural-historical and literary studies that have shed great light upon the deep, gendered symbolic patterns that infiltrated, at every level, political life and artistic creation

in eighteenth-century Britain. The book ends in the early nineteenth century when women writers themselves sought to profit from the Enlightenment interest in their historical role and influence by writing works of historical biography and art history. It begins in an era when, as the Anglican educational writer and philosopher Mary Astell wrote, women were rarely the subject of history and history was of little interest to most of them: 'Since Men being the Historians, they seldom condescend to record the great and good Actions of Women; and when they take notice of them, 'tis with this wise Remark, That such Women acted above their Sex.'<sup>2</sup> Rather, it was in the arenas of theology and moral philosophy that the question of women's distinctive participation in the collective life of society, including but also beyond the realm of the household, was most thoroughly rehearsed. This earlier period was one in which ethical and religious writers sought to locate the foundation of morals in the constitution of human nature, and, in so doing, to determine whether morality springs from reason, sentiment, the affections or the moral sense.<sup>3</sup> A number of women writers responded enthusiastically to the emerging notion of the private affections as the source of moral norms in society, and of 'benevolence' (the selfless, well-meaning disposition we have towards fellow members of society) as the essence of moral behaviour. With this commitment to a sense of the wider social significance of their moral actions, women writers contributed, as we will see, to vigorous debate as to whether morality is primarily a matter of rational choice or sentiment, and whether it is benevolence or self-interest that holds society together. That debate about the kinds of moral and social enquiry that can be derived from the study of human nature occurred with particular intensity in England in the wake of works by Thomas Hobbes and Bernard Mandeville. The questions posed by their depiction of society as something held together by a combination of greedy self-interest and political coercion travelled north and lay at the root of Scottish Enlightenment philosophy and political economy. And in very many of these debates, the conduct of women – their selfless virtue, their consumer greed, their sexual manipulation of men – not only functioned as a case in point, but opened out a new analytical field which accorded them, for the first time, a complex and changing social identity.

By identifying the place of women in British Enlightenment debates, this book must inevitably take a view about the nature of the Enlightenment itself. In doing so, I have been particularly mindful of recent research that has breathed new life into the previously flagging field of Enlightenment studies, including books by J. G. A. Pocock, John

Robertson, Roy Porter and Jonathan Israel.<sup>4</sup> Robertson has made a compelling case for a return to a study of the Enlightenment 'which restores the primacy of its intellectual contribution', even as he situates his own study of the Enlightenment in Scotland and Naples within a thickly described social and political setting, as well as for an Enlightenment that was, above all, concerned with 'understanding, and hence advancing, the causes and conditions of human betterment in this world', through the study of human nature in society, and of the economic means to social improvement.<sup>5</sup> Within these terms of definition, Robertson is committed to a view of the Enlightenment as a unitary phenomenon, with local manifestations in Scotland, Naples and elsewhere, but with a very poor showing in eighteenth-century England.<sup>6</sup> By contrast, J. G. A. Pocock's four-volume study of Edward Gibbon starts from the premise, first articulated by him many years before, of a distinctive, conservative and Anglican English Enlightenment. This Enlightenment, strongly connected by religious ties and shared history to a continental Protestant tradition, was not, like its French counterpart, an affair of alienated, anti-clerical *philosophes*, but of an intellectual movement of academics, churchmen and politically involved intellectuals such as Gibbon and Edmund Burke (and he is emphatic about Burke's inclusion in this company).<sup>7</sup> This was a broadly Whiggish Enlightenment, concerned to preserve the constitutional arrangements, the (restricted) civil rights and religious toleration enshrined in the settlement of 1688–9, as well as to limit the power of churches or religious groups to 'disturb the peace of civil society'.<sup>8</sup> From this preoccupation with the need to preserve a civil social space from religious fanaticism and political tyranny, came both 'a history of mind and society together', and a programme for gradual social improvement.<sup>9</sup> Pocock's Enlightenment has some similarities with the self-confident and unradical English Enlightenment celebrated by Roy Porter in his *Enlightenment: Britain and the Creation of the Modern World*; although, for Porter, as not for Pocock, this Enlightenment was an indigenously British, precociously modern, somewhat secular affair, having its roots in the scientific and political revolutions of the late seventeenth century.

More congruent with Pocock's English Enlightenment, and of immense value to the present study, is the portrait of the enlightening process at work in English intellectual life in B. W. Young's *Religion and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century England*.<sup>10</sup> Young's specific focus is upon the liberal, anti-dogmatic and scientifically informed world of Anglican divines who variously adapted Newtonian physics and Lockean

philosophy to the theological and institutional needs of the national church. In the process, they extended and updated the tradition of 'Latitudinarianism' that had grown up in the late seventeenth-century Anglican church, and had promoted freedom of conscience, reason and experience, rather than liturgy, doctrine and ecclesiastical organisation, as guides to religious truth. Many of the women writers discussed in this study, including Damaris Masham, Catharine Cockburn and Elizabeth Carter, can be situated within the broad framework of this 'late Latitudinarian' Anglican preoccupation with the uses and limits of reason, the happiness that comes from a moral life, the possibility of human progress, and the salvation that comes, not only from faith, but from active, good works.<sup>11</sup> And over and above these intellectual circles, such issues were at the heart of the lively debates between Anglicans and Dissenters, especially rational dissenters, who, as Young points out, shared a sense of belonging to an 'Enlightened age', a common debt to John Locke's philosophy, and a hostility to obfuscating superstitions and rituals.<sup>12</sup>

Rational Dissent, or Unitarianism, was, as a number of studies have shown, uniquely important for the development of the feminism of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and many major figures were either rational Dissenters, such as Mary Wollstonecraft, or Anglicans with great sympathy for dissenting views, such as Catharine Macaulay.<sup>13</sup> There were, of course, considerable political differences between broad-church Anglican supporters of the established government and its dissenting opponents, but historians have often emphasised these at the expense of their shared, self-consciously Enlightened perspectives on matters of theology, of the freedom of the will, and of the use of reason to improve our life on this earth and our chance of heaven in the next. John Robertson has recently speculated about the possibility for formulating the case for an English Enlightenment made up of these Latitudinarian Anglican and rational dissenting elements, starting with the Anglican 'emphasis on human free will rather than an all-determining divine will' on which 'the Rational Dissenters built a fresh conviction of the human capacity for virtue, and their feminist associates a new vision of a sexually egalitarian republicanism'.<sup>14</sup> He adds that, on this basis, 'it may not, after all, be incongruous to think of an English Enlightenment facing in both conservative and radical directions over the course of the century'.<sup>15</sup> Certainly, this idea of an English Enlightenment, encompassing a fruitful, if sometimes unstable, mixture of Anglicanism and Dissent, Whiggism and radicalism, helps to make sense of the evolving debate about the nature and role of women. It is also helpful for what it excludes, specifically the

High Church and evangelical elements of eighteenth-century intellectual life (always allowing for the complicating presence of Mary Astell). It is these elements, with their 'mystical critique of rational religion' and emphasis on innate human sinfulness, that Young positions as something akin to a 'counter-Enlightenment' in Britain.<sup>16</sup> Young's story stops short of the Evangelical revival of the 1780s and after, with its decisive rejection of what it saw as flabby Latitudinarianism and heretical rational dissent. But, for the purposes of this study, it is helpful to describe this, also, as part of a counter-Enlightenment, not least because it allows us to see how women Evangelicals themselves redirected the energies of the Enlightenment towards the moral tutelage of the young, the poor and the enslaved, conceding, in the process, that this must be their specialised female role. The closing section of this book considers the extent to which evangelical women, many of whom, from Hannah More onwards, played such a prominent part in nineteenth-century public life, can be said to have taken forward or defeated the legacy of Enlightenment ideas about women. It also, amid a story of partial failure, traces the legacy of the Enlightenment idea of the progress of society, and the place of women within that society, into early nineteenth-century political economy, including the works of Malthus and of the women political economists of this period.

That legacy was preserved, as a thread in nineteenth-century British Whiggism, by a generation of men who had learned about economics, the progress of society and the need for a rational education for men and women at the great Scottish universities, or, at least, by reading the classic works of the Scottish Enlightenment. The Scottish Enlightenment (which was partly clerical in impetus, like its English counterpart), and its extraordinary engagement with the place of women within its historical investigations of human society, lies at the heart of this study. The book traces the contours of this engagement, and explores the impact of earlier English theological and philosophical ideas in Scotland. It also seeks to account for the different ways in which these arguments about the role of women in the progress of civilisation were taken up in England; including, for example, Gibbon's approach to the history of women through a historically comparative legal framework, and the moralised, relatively conservative idea of the progress of society that Elizabeth Montagu and her Bluestocking circle derived from their friendships with Scottish writers such as Lord Kames and James Beattie. The rich traffic of ideas between Scotland and England is a constant theme of this book, as well as the powerful influence of French thinkers – Montesquieu in particular – on



both sides of the border. One important set of ideas promoted by that traffic had to do with Scotland and England's Gothic and medieval past, its connection to their shared European heritage, and the long-term effects of the high status accorded to women by their ancestors. A growing interest in Gothic and medieval history fed into an Enlightenment narrative of Europe's transition from feudalism to commercial modernity, and assigned to women a privileged place in the history of European 'manners', in particular the manners associated with the culture of chivalry. This debate about women and chivalry played out in many different ways in Britain, but converged upon the question that would come to haunt the nineteenth century: to what extent is a culture of gender separation and of male deference towards women consistent with a modern, Enlightened civilisation? The answer from Catharine Macaulay, Mary Wollstonecraft and John Stuart Mill, delivered in historical terms supplied by the Enlightenment, was an emphatic 'not at all'; for them civilisation would remain, at best, only a work in progress so long as women were still living in the Dark Ages. Others, however, were less exercised by the failure of the progress of society to deliver rights for women than by the possibilities of a rich historical identity offered by this variant of Enlightenment history. The discovery that women have a history, indeed, that by their very social position they have a special insight into Europe's peculiar past, emboldened unprecedented numbers of women to write history: not only the history of women's lives (although by the early nineteenth century there was an avalanche of these), but of Europe's manners, literature and art.

The Enlightenment that lies behind the title of this book, then, is one primarily concerned with questions of human nature (male and female) and its selfish or benevolent tendencies; with morality as it operates for the good of society, but also as it relates to the moral law of God; with the institutional structures, manners and progressive development of society; with the cultural preconditions and cultural outcomes of commercial modernity (a chicken-and-egg question); with history as the record of progress and also as an aid to collective social self-understanding; and with the need to understand the economy and population growth in order to prevent injustice and disaster, and to promote further progress. This is not a secular or secularising Enlightenment, despite the central involvement of unbelievers such as Hume, but rather one that moves from theological debate about the pleasurable and efficacy of worldly benevolence to questions of human agency in society, including the agency of women. These questions are, in turn, deeply entangled with one of the central

arguments within the European Enlightenment: the extent to which men's social co-operation derives from their natural capacity for altruism (the Christian and neo-Stoic view) or from their self-interested passions and mutual needs (the Epicurean and Hobbesean view). Women writers, unsurprisingly, almost always aligned themselves with arguments for natural sociability (often tacitly derived from the philosopher Lord Shaftesbury), but, as we will see, this presented them with enormous difficulties when they came to reckon with the Epicurean foundations of contemporary political economy. The Enlightenment presented here is very much a Protestant one, with connections to continental Protestant writers such as Pierre Bayle (directly, and via Mandeville) and Poulain de la Barre (a French Catholic convert to the Protestant faith), but one that nevertheless treats the English and Scottish cases as separate, if mutually illuminating, intellectual constellations. It is also, with different resonances on each side of the border, largely a Whig Enlightenment in which prominent Whig Anglican divines, such as Gilbert Burnet, Joseph Butler and Thomas Secker, played an important role in encouraging female learning.

This model of the Enlightenment runs somewhat counter to the tendency of recent histories of feminism to focus upon Tory and Jacobite female opponents of the Revolution of 1688–9. This in itself, as I shall argue below, springs from an undue historical focus, in feminist history, upon Locke's political writings as marking a decisive conceptual separation between the public sphere of civil society and the private sphere. Much of this derives from Carole Pateman's influential thesis that the second of Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* (1689) inaugurated a new phase of political theory which specifically excluded women from civil society on the grounds of their natural subordination to men, and that civil society 'is not structured by kinship and the power of the fathers; in the modern world, women are subordinated to men as men, or to men as a fraternity'.<sup>17</sup> This has proved powerful as an analysis of the workings of modern liberal politics, but, in relation to historical accounts of women and the British Enlightenment, it has too firmly set the terms of discussion to questions of women's public and private identities. It has also, until very recently, led to an emphasis upon those women writers who dissented from the Whig culture of empirical enquiry, religious latitude and pragmatic politics, a culture that Locke in fact helped to shape. This, in turn, has downplayed some of the very real continuities that existed between the re-evaluation of women's spiritual, moral and rational capacities, need for education, and social influence that took place in the wake of Locke's work, and the works of the Bluestockings and more radical women writers at the end of this period.

This study aims to explain some of those continuities without, it is hoped, framing a Whiggish narrative of its own, either about the contribution of particular kinds of proto-liberal politics to the bettering of women's lives, or about the rise of feminist thought. This period, certainly, witnessed the creation of the conceptual categories that were, ultimately, necessary to women's articulation of their demand for equal civil and political rights. Yet it was also one in which the redescription, by eighteenth-century writers, of women as influential members of the intermediate terrain between the political and the private spheres that they called 'society' was accompanied by the rise of increasingly polarised notions of gender difference. That difference, discussed by many of the writers in this study in terms of its social effects, was also increasingly mapped on to ever more rigid and stable notions of the biological differences between the sexes. That sense of underlying biological difference came from new medical theories about the workings of the body, its nervous and muscular systems, and the connection between the body's physical and psychic aspects.<sup>18</sup> It was also the product of broader cultural anxieties in which femininity functioned as a portmanteau term of negative or positive value as Britain came to discursive terms with growth of the commercial sector of the economy.<sup>19</sup> Such attributions, as Dror Wahrman has argued, acquired intensified resonance in Britain during the crisis of the American Revolutionary War, and they reflected back on to gender ideology in ways that both hardened and moralised sexual distinctions.<sup>20</sup> They were also, to some degree, symptomatic of public disquiet about the involvement of women in party politics, something female aristocrats had enjoyed almost as a matter of dynastic entitlement for many centuries, but which, after the 1780s, became less and less acceptable to the public.<sup>21</sup> The loss, to women as a group, of the dubious leadership of such figures as Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, was not a great one, and the explicit restriction of the franchise, for the first time, to 'male persons' in the 1832 Reform Act simply confirmed their de facto political exclusion. In terms of political and civil rights, the period from the late eighteenth century to the early nineteenth century was one of no progress; indeed, there is evidence that the property rights of widows and married women actually declined during this period.<sup>22</sup> There were a few anonymous publications (notably *The Hardships of the English Laws in Relation to Wives*, 1735 and *The Laws Respecting Women*, 1777) protesting against this legal state of affairs, and, particularly in the 1790s, there were a number of male reformers who, alongside Wollstonecraft, made the case for political rights for women.<sup>23</sup>

## HISTORICAL LOSSES AND GAINS

The static, or even deteriorating, legal and political situation of women, and the dichotomised, gendered language of much political and economic public debate did not, however, correspond to a diminishing sphere of social operation for women in this period. Indeed, the period gave rise to a growing number of opportunities for middle- and upper-class women to exercise their talents outside the family in both informal and institutionalised settings. Some of these opportunities were in relation to leisure activities (debating societies, commercial pleasure gardens, assembly rooms, theatres), others involved social intervention such as philanthropy, petitioning or campaigning (against the slave trade, notably).<sup>24</sup> Women not born to, or lucky enough to escape from, a life of agricultural labour, domestic service, manufacturing or other poorly paid work, did find remuneration as nurses, teachers or writers – the latter two enormously on the increase in this period to the point where, by the late eighteenth century, unprecedented numbers of women were teaching in or even running schools, and publishing novels and poems.<sup>25</sup> Recent historians have investigated extensively this enlargement of opportunities for women and the sense of collective female self-confidence that came with it. All of this has greatly complicated the case, forcefully made by Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, for a dialectical process of middle-class identity formation and the emergence of an ideology of separate male and female spheres during the Industrial Revolution.<sup>26</sup> Davidoff and Hall's study provoked heated and productive debate, and historians now generally concur that the separate sphere idea was either a defensive reaction by men to the growing prominence of women in British life, or that women themselves encouraged and elaborated this ideology as a means of securing themselves a platform from which to act and speak as proper ladies.<sup>27</sup> Among those arguing the latter case, Eve Tavor Bannet has written that the achievement of Enlightenment feminism was a repositioning of the family, and of women within it, at the heart of the nation, and an assertion of 'continuity between the ordering of private families and the peace, prosperity and well-being of the state'.<sup>28</sup> A sophisticated version of this case has been made by Harriet Guest in her study *Small Change: Women, Learning, Patriotism*, when she argues that, even when women celebrate the domestic realm of the family, it often comes across as contradictory, 'strangely without content and lacking in definition'.<sup>29</sup> One reason for this apparent vacuum at the heart of middle-class separate spheres ideology is, she suggests, that 'domesticity gains

in value as a result of its continuity with the social or the public, and not only as a result of its asocial exclusion'.<sup>30</sup> Guest traces a series of discursive shifts, from the mid eighteenth to the early nineteenth centuries, that eventually enabled women to 'define their gendered identities through the nature and degree of their approximation to the public identities of political citizens'.<sup>31</sup>

Guest tells a story of continuity and incremental progress. It differs from the argument advanced at the end of this study which places more emphasis upon the reconfiguration, even, to an extent, defeat (except among philosophical Whigs and radical Dissenters) of Enlightenment ideas about women that occurred in the wake of the Napoleonic wars and the public dissemination of Evangelical theology and morality. As we will see, most Enlightenment writing about women argued against the undue confinement of women to private or domestic spaces, and characterised that confinement as, at worst, perverted (citing the model of eastern sultans and their harems), or, at best, likely to deprive society as a whole of women's energising and conciliatory presence. It was for the second of these reasons that many writers also tended to regard both domestic drudgery and paid work by middle-class women as inherently oppressive and exploitative, and as something that took them out of social circulation (after all, there was a growing army of female servants to do most of the work for leisured women). Eighteenth-century writers' sense of the boundary between the domestic and social realms was generally fluid and informal. The ideological demarcation of the domestic, when it did occur with greater frequency in the early nineteenth century, was couched either in a personal language of self-conscious retreat from one's normal social existence, or in a more generalised language of nostalgia for a time when the country was little more than an alliance of virtuous homesteads.<sup>32</sup> This nostalgia was itself the product of the historicising of domestic and social life that took place in the eighteenth century, anchoring it to a narrative of the progress of civilisation. That narrative, adumbrated in many genres of writing, usually included the story of women's emergence from domestic seclusion, violence and enslavement by selfish men into a bigger arena in which they exercised both a stimulating and stabilising influence on the developing economy. The arena was often ill defined in spatial terms (though explicitly not the aristocratic world of the court) or remained largely a virtual one (of publication, or epistolary exchange). For some, notably Catharine Macaulay and Mary Wollstonecraft, it was a rehearsal space for female citizenship, and for others, like Catharine Cockburn and Elizabeth Carter, it was the familial

and social domain affected by women's rational moral choices. As more restrictive and moralised versions of the domestic sphere emerged from the neo-conservative cultural reaction to the American Revolution and, still more, to the French Revolution, women writers fashioned accounts of their influence and moral activity that depended, not so much upon the continuity, as upon the *analogy*, of the domestic and the civil realms.<sup>33</sup> Some early nineteenth-century women historians, as we will see in [chapter 6](#), found a profitable and appreciative market for historical accounts of women who, without ever setting foot outside their households, could not help but influence the world by virtue of their status as princesses, queens, royal consorts or wives of men of destiny.

#### POLITICAL ANALOGIES AND NATURAL LAW

The resurfacing, in the early nineteenth century, of analogies between the domestic realm and the state, is, in many ways, less surprising than the relative scarcity of analogies like these in most of the previous decades. Such analogies had formed part of a richly suggestive language of gender conflict in the late seventeenth century, when the place of women was discussed in a vocabulary derived from political theory (using terms such as duty, sovereignty, contract, 'passive obedience', the right of rebellion). During the first half of the eighteenth century, this language steadily disappeared, partly as a result of the waning of the bitter political controversy that followed the ousting of the Stuart royal family (often debated in terms of rape and family betrayal), partly because, after Mary II and Anne, there were no queens on the throne, and partly because Enlightenment writers from Hume to Burke and Jeremy Bentham discredited contract theories of politics. In the process, women writers lost a rich resource for thinking about gender relations as a microcosm of the political. Late seventeenth- to early eighteenth-century writers such as Astell, Delarivier Manley, Mary, Lady Chudleigh, Sarah Fyge Egerton and Lady Mary Wortley Montagu used the language of political allegiance and rebellion to spectacular effect in their writings about women. Astell in *Some Reflections upon Marriage* (1700), especially in the preface to the third edition of 1706, brilliantly probes the homology of domestic and political power, and exposes the hypocrisy of those who claim that authority is derived from the consent of the governed:

if the Matrimonial Yoke be grievous, neither Law nor Custom afford her [the wife] that redress which a Man obtains. He who has Sovereign Power does not

value the Provocations of a Rebellious Subject, but knows how to subdue him with ease, and will make himself obey'd; but Patience and Submission are the Only Comforts that are left to a poor People, who groan under Tyranny, unless they are Strong enough to break the Yoke, to Depose and Abdicate, which I doubt wou'd not be allow'd of here.<sup>34</sup>

Astell deploys the Whig critique of arbitrary power (the framers held that James II had broken the 'original contract' between king and people, and had 'abdicated the government') in order to expose the reality of male power and tyranny to which women voluntarily subject themselves when they enter into the marriage contract. Juridical contracts or covenants in both the marital and political arenas are really just forms of customary subordination: 'For Covenants betwixt Husband and Wife, like Laws in an Arbitrary Government, are of little Force, the Will of the Sovereign is all in all.'<sup>35</sup> And custom, as Patricia Springborg has argued in her study of Astell, yields no right, and it may interfere with women's God-given entitlement to freedom from domination and moral autonomy.<sup>36</sup>

Astell's acquaintance and correspondent, Mary, Lady Chudleigh, distilled some of Astell's ideas in her poem *The Ladies Defence* (1701) in which the female protagonist, Melissa, complains about the hypocrisy of men who are Whigs in the coffee house, but Tories in the bedroom: 'Passive Obedience you've to us [women] transferr'd,/And we must drudge in Paths where you have err'd:/That antiquated Doctrine you disown;/ 'Tis now your Scorn, and fit for us alone.'<sup>37</sup> Montagu's letters, written during her residence in Turkey in 1716–18 and published in 1763, also make intricate and witty use of the intersecting languages of political and domestic politics as she repeatedly contemplates the paradoxical personal liberty of Turkish women within a despotic political system. She playfully evokes the despotism of the Ottoman Empire as a warning to the 'passive-obedient men' of the English Tory and Jacobite persuasion, while referring repeatedly to the 'privileges' and 'prerogative' of the Austrian and Turkish ladies ('the only free people in the Empire'), and to the 'principle of *passive-obedience*' that allegedly guides her conduct as the wife of a Whig ambassador.<sup>38</sup> Montagu's wryly subversive accounts of the sexual and social freedoms of Turkish women have a libertine flavour ('the Turkish ladies don't commit one sin the less for not being Christians'), but, also, strongly party-political overtones.<sup>39</sup> This is because many of the letters are addressed to Montagu's sister, the Countess of Mar, who had very recently followed her husband into exile in France, following his support of the Pretender during the Jacobite rebellion of 1715. Although Montagu disapproved of her brother-in-law's politics, she indirectly pays a compliment to her sister's loyalty to

him in a letter to her, about the widow of the deposed and reputedly poisoned Sultan Mustafa II who stays true to her husband's memory and refuses to be reconciled to the new Sultan.<sup>40</sup> This letter implicitly acknowledges and explores the conflicting personal and political allegiances that structured the lives of aristocratic women of her era.

Montagu's Whiggish letters to her Jacobite sister are a case in point of the cross-party salience, in the early eighteenth century, of the politicised language of female liberty, passive obedience, marital contract, prerogative and duty. Undoubtedly, that language was deployed with peculiar force by those women writers, notably Manley, Astell and Aphra Behn, who were opposed to Whiggery in all its forms. However, as Rachel Weil has shown in her incisive study of the gender applications of political argument in this period, this language was manipulated by Whig, Tory and Jacobite writers to a variety of feminist ends.<sup>41</sup> Works by Tory women writers such as Manley's *Secret History, of Queen Zarah* (1705) and her *Court Intrigues . . . from . . . New Atalantis* (1711) gave biting satirical accounts of political and sexual betrayal, personal and political disloyalty and ingratitude in the behaviour of certain Whig grandees. A number of Whig women, such as Elizabeth Singer Rowe and Mary Davys, positioned themselves in self-conscious opposition to the Cavalier libertinism of figures like Manley and Behn, and variously drew attention to their virtuous femininity, Horatian retirement, provincial way of life and amateurism as means of understanding their writing.<sup>42</sup> Others writers, such as the author of *An Essay in Defence of the Female Sex* (1696, almost certainly by the Anglican physician and writer Judith Drake), combined a commitment to Locke's epistemology and modern learning with a Tory political outlook. Drake argued that women should be encouraged to develop the social and intellectual skills that would allow them to have a civilising effect upon men. Drake's argument anticipates the cases made for the mixed social spaces of mid eighteenth-century England when she says that men need to attain a 'mixture of Freedom, Observance, and a desire of pleasing': an 'Accomplishment' which 'is best, if not only to be accomplish'd by conversing with us'.<sup>43</sup> However modest they appear, it was arguments like these, more than the political language of gender protest, that were most effective in creating a sense of a civil identity for women in the eighteenth century. Certainly, the discursive politicising of male/female relationships went into sharp decline in the eighteenth century, after a brief period of revival during periods of intense party-political controversy such as the Exclusion Crisis and the decades immediately following the Glorious Revolution.<sup>44</sup> Constance Jordan, in her



study of *Renaissance Feminism*, suggests that, in England in particular, the depoliticising of marriage (an institution described, in the sixteenth century, very much in terms of male household governance) had been underway since the mid seventeenth century.<sup>45</sup> This decline may well have reflected broader social shifts (as Lawrence Stone famously described them) in the composition and conception of the family as a small, domestic unit based on affective ties, although, in practice, it appears that these shifts occurred only to a limited degree in this period.<sup>46</sup>

A more stable line of discursive continuity from the seventeenth to the late eighteenth century came from the Renaissance feminist critique of natural law. Traditional, neo-Aristotelian natural law posited a hierarchical order of creation in which woman occupied a lower place, being physically weaker and naturally subordinate to man, and it prescribed different 'offices' (or duties) to each sex.<sup>47</sup> Natural law is accessible to reason and consistent with the divine law, and, for this reason, man-made, positive laws can only be just and valid if they do not violate its general principles. Renaissance sceptics, critical of this tradition, pointed to the enormous variations in laws and conventions, including those that governed women's lives, over time and across continents, and they analysed the power structures that motivated those arrangements. Such critiques could take the form of analyses of abuses of power and pleas for those in power not to exceed their rights, erudite enumerations of variations in social practice or demolitions of vulgar masculine prejudice.<sup>48</sup> Pro-women writers continued to criticise male abuses of power in these terms well into the eighteenth century: male power, wrote the Parisian salonnière the Marquise de Lambert, exists 'par la force plutôt que par le droit naturelle'.<sup>49</sup> These arguments were enhanced by the spread, from the mid seventeenth century, of Cartesian ideas about the partial autonomy of the mind from the body, and about the faculty of reason (naturally equal in all human beings) that enables people to distinguish between truth and received wisdom. Highly educated women in both France and England gained inspiration and method from Descartes' work for a variety of learned and scientific pursuits, as well as a philosophical basis for their claim, against the traditional tenets of natural law, to equal rational capacity.<sup>50</sup> Most impressively, the French philosopher Poulain de la Barre combined, in his series of feminist works in the 1670s, a rationalist, Cartesian critique of the common prejudices of mankind with a historically and geographically informed assault on the spurious universalism of natural law. In the most famous of his works, *De l'égalité des deux sexes* (1673), Poulain dissected the cumulative layers of custom and tradition that lead society to believe

in women's 'natural' inferiority, and made the case for their physical cognitive and intellectual equality with men: 'En effet nous avons, tous hommes et femmes, le mesme droit sur la verité, puisque l'esprit est en tous également capable de la connoistre'.<sup>51</sup> Alongside this Cartesian argument for epistemological (and hence also spiritual) equality, Poulain makes the case for natural equality against those jurists who wrongly extrapolate the laws of nature from the unjust social conventions: 'les Jurisconsultes qui avoient aussi leur préjugé, ont attribué à la nature une distinction qui ne vient que de la coutume'.<sup>52</sup> Poulain asserts that there is no reason why women should not do most of the same jobs as men, and enjoy an equal share of power.<sup>53</sup> His writings have been the subject of a pioneering study by Siep Stuurman, which emphasises, above all, Poulain's originality in transforming Cartesianism into 'an Enlightenment social philosophy'.<sup>54</sup> Poulain's social philosophy consists in his construction of a conjectural history ('conjecture historique') of the subjection of women; this, Stuurman shows, begins with the division of labour within the family, and then the progressive exclusion of women from intellectual pursuits and proper education, reinforced by their socialisation into a life of frivolity.<sup>55</sup> Poulain often deviates into remarks about the natural superiority of women in certain areas such as conversation.<sup>56</sup> However, his work is remarkable, and for our purposes exceptionally prescient, in the way that it forges a feminist argument through an evolutionary account of society. Where earlier feminist critics of natural law had exposed the male will to power that lay behind seemingly incoherent variations in custom and opinion, Poulain sees a historical process of female subjection at work that can be read alongside the formation of laws and the state, and that might, in time, be changed.

Poulain anticipates the conjectural histories of Rousseau and of the Scottish Enlightenment, and his work was certainly known to the Marquise de Lambert and Judith Drake. Beyond this, the extent of the influence of this and his other works is itself a matter of historical conjecture. *De l'égalité* was translated into English in 1677, and also appeared, in a different, elegant and unacknowledged translation in 1758 under the title *Female Rights Vindicated*, supposedly 'By a Lady'. The work may have been known, in England, to Astell, William Walsh (author of *A Dialogue Concerning Women*, 1691) and John Toland.<sup>57</sup> Toland, a radical philosopher and freethinker, was well connected to continental intellectual circles (he knew Bayle, for example), and shared Poulain's desire to expose 'prejudice', especially in religious matters, but also, on occasion, in matters relating to the female intellect. In the preface to his *Letters to Serena* (1704, addressed to the learned Queen Sophie

Charlotte of Prussia), he writes that ‘whether the Exclusion of Women from Learning be the Effect of inveterate Custom, or proceeds from Designs in the Men, shall be no Inquiry of mine’, and yet goes on to discuss a number of distinguished female scholars, and the prejudice of men against them.<sup>58</sup>

A Cartesian critique of male ‘prejudice’, whether directly or indirectly inspired by Poulain, continued to surface, at intervals, in pro-female writing throughout the eighteenth century. The best-known reprise of this critique occurs in a work entitled *Woman Not Inferior to Man* (1739) by a writer who styles herself as ‘Sophia’. Literary historians have assumed that this work is a partial and unacknowledged translation of Poulain, though it is, in fact, a free adaptation of his work written in a highly personal, disarmingly frank, female-identified voice (for example, her remark that men are ‘stubborn brats’).<sup>59</sup> Sophia is less interested in the historical and sociological aspects of Poulain’s argument than in his analysis of the workings of male power, and she spends most of her work embellishing the parts of *De l’égalité des deux sexes* concerned with women’s intellectual fitness for scientific enquiry and public appointments. Starting with the pseudo-Cartesian point that ‘reason’ is a ‘prerogative that nature has bestowed’ upon women (adapted and elaborated in England, as we will see in [chapter 1](#), by Anglican women writers), Sophia contends that physical differences between men and women are minimal, and that the common view that they can’t have jobs in the church, the government and the army is simply the product of male bias, stupidity and exclusion: ‘Why is *learning* useless to us? Because we have no share in public offices. And why have we no share in public offices? Because we have no *learning*?’<sup>60</sup> Sophia intersperses her adaptation of the French author with English quotations from Rowe and Pope, and with references to Boadicea, Queen Elizabeth and to ‘Eliza’ (clearly, Elizabeth Carter), cited as a modern example of ‘towering superiority of . . . genius and judgment’.<sup>61</sup>

Sophia’s identity has long been a mystery, and it is not even certain that she was female, although she does write with a very pronounced sense of solidarity with her female readers. There are similarities of theme and tone with the sixth number of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu’s *The Nonsense of Common-Sense*, in which she argues that ‘vulgar Prejudices’ against women’s rational capabilities should be dispelled, not least because this leads men to the mistake ‘of treating the weaker Sex with a Contempt that has a very bad Influence on their Conduct’.<sup>62</sup> This lends some support to the theory that Sophia was Sophia Fermor, daughter of the brilliant Henrietta-Louisa, Countess of Pomfret, the friend and correspondent of

Montagu.<sup>63</sup> Sophia herself gave a much clearer sense of her personality, background and circumstances in the second of her publications, a reply to an attack on her by an anonymous gentleman, *Man Superior to Woman* (1740). Sophia's answer, although it incorporates some more extracts from Poulain, is a forceful, often angrily sarcastic, attack on the way that men argue and coerce women into submission: 'does he take all the *Women* for such easy idiots that they are to be coax'd out of their natural right by every fawning sycophant, sneer'd out of it by every word-retailing witling, or braved out of it by every wife-beating bully?'<sup>64</sup> Sophia gives a series of portraits of male 'characters', given to libertinism, lust and brutality: Hectorius who beats his virtuous wife ('plates, cups, knives or whatever things come first to hand, are the vehicles by which he conveys his ideas to her'), Anarchus ('when a-bed frequently puking' on his wife), and men like Molybditis whose daughters quickly learn what they can expect from their spoiled brothers ('before little master is well breech'd, he is taught to lord it over his sisters').<sup>65</sup> Aside from the portraits, Sophia adapts and paraphrases snatches of Poulain to substantiate her argument, from the laws of nature, for women's original equality, and their right to autonomy (she points out that jurists 'themselves acknowledge dependence and servitude to be contrary to the design of nature').<sup>66</sup> Custom and history, she insists, are nothing but the usurpation of the 'rights and liberties of Women'.<sup>67</sup> For her, those 'liberties' are largely economic and intellectual. Sophia uses arguments from natural law to denounce the violence and sexual double standards of men, but stops well short of advocating greater social tolerance for women's sexual freedoms. Sophia also treats custom and history as monolithic and unchanging edifices, from which examples can be cited and counter-cited.

In many respects, Sophia's case for greater equality and esteem for women remains in a seventeenth-century mode, in that she does not take on board the accounts of the social formation of female identity that can be found, not only in Poulain himself, but in a number of writers, from the later seventeenth century, such as Drake and Locke. Locke's enormously influential treatise *Some Thoughts concerning Education* (1693), for example, describes how little girls are socialised into their customary roles as ornaments and man-pleasers: 'And when the little Girl is tricked up in her new Gown and Commode, how can her Mother do less than teach her to Admire her self by calling her her little Queen and her Princess? Thus the little ones are taught to be Proud of their Cloathes, before they can put them on.'<sup>68</sup>

So continues, Locke writes, a wasted childhood as girls' natural energy is spent on trivial pursuits instead of on improving the mind and exercising the body:

I have seen little Girls exercise whole Hours together, and take abundance of pains to be expert at Dibstones, as they call it: Whilst I have been looking on, I have thought, it wanted only some good Contrivance, to make them employ all that Industry about something that might be more useful to them; and methinks 'tis only the fault and negligence of elder People, that it is not so.<sup>69</sup>

Locke's own 'contrivance' was for a limited equality of education between girls and boys, but his analysis of the upbringing of girls here may have proved more influential than his prescriptions. Many eighteenth-century writers extended and elaborated this kind of analysis of female socialisation as part of more historicised accounts of the evolution of modern 'manners'. Some writers, from Locke's friend Damaris Masham to Wollstonecraft, also speculated about the educational and social preconditions for women to participate on an equal footing in male intellectual culture, in the ways that Cartesian feminists had hoped. But, given the growing sense of the pervasive force of manners in shaping the way people think, others could not help but confirm what a distant dream that equal participation really was.

#### LIBERTINISM AS SOCIAL ANALYSIS

Most of the writers discussed in this book advocated or practised a reasoned analysis of the customary treatment and education of women in order to understand, and, in some cases, to change the culture in which they lived. A few engaged in a more fundamental rethinking of the moral and social vocabularies through which women were understood, sometimes through philosophical or literary imaginative inversions of the social order. Foremost among these was Mandeville, remarkable for the prominence he accorded in his works to such matters as female modesty, chastity, intellectual capability and sexual exploitation. Few subsequent writers, male or female, owned up to liking or approving of Mandeville's works. Yet those works are worth pausing over here, not only because of their well-known impact upon the Scottish Enlightenment, but also because they conveyed to the eighteenth-century reading public the remnant of a rich tradition of continental scholarly exploration of the relativity of moral values, or *libertinage érudit*. This tradition had some bearing on the view of women, since the values of female chastity and modesty had

always been, and were becoming ever more, from the late seventeenth century, points from which British society took its moral bearings.<sup>70</sup> The tradition of *libertinage érudit* had its origins in the revival of Epicurean ideas in the early seventeenth century, and was, in its rational probing of traditional knowledges, boosted by the subsequent spread of Cartesianism.<sup>71</sup> It was this intellectual current, more than any other of the seventeenth century, that moved European philosophers towards a consideration of the nature of man and the psychological, ethical and religious basis of his operations as a social being, and, along with this, towards an interest in women as social beings. Marie de Gournay's *Egalité des hommes et des femmes* (1622), to cite a prominent instance, was partly the result of her intellectual involvement with a circle of prominent *libertins érudits*.<sup>72</sup>

Pierre Bayle himself may be placed in this tradition, and was an author who, as David Wootton has shown, took an exceptionally open-minded and intense interest in sexual morality, and the degree to which the strict sexual morality enjoined by religion is in conflict with the promptings of nature.<sup>73</sup> Bayle, as Wootton argues, took an earthy, liberal attitude towards such matters as female sexual freedom and prostitution, and, in the article 'Patin' in his *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (1697, second edition 1702), he showed how sanctimonious social insistence upon female chastity can lead to women attempting abortions or killing their babies, because their fear of public shame overcomes the natural dictates of their consciences. Bayle's *Dictionnaire* was translated into English in 1710, and again in 1734–41, and was widely discussed in early eighteenth-century Britain.<sup>74</sup> Bayle's 'feminism' (as Wootton terms it) may well have rubbed off on acquaintances such as Gilbert Burnet (discussed in [chapter 1](#)). Much of the flavour and some of the substance of Bayle's covertly expressed religious scepticism and Epicurean vision of society (including its female members) reached British audiences through the works of Mandeville, who had very probably studied under Bayle when at school in Rotterdam. Mandeville moved to London in the 1690s to practise as a physician, and, in transit, became a Whig, supporting the Glorious Revolution, the Protestant succession and limited monarchy.<sup>75</sup> In the 1723 version of Mandeville's *The Fable of the Bees*, there is a discussion of infanticide, remarkably similar to Bayle's 'Patin', in which a fashionable young lady, seduced, impregnated and abandoned by a 'Powerful Deceiver', is driven to destroy her child.<sup>76</sup> Women like this, Mandeville observes, are so overwhelmed by censorious social attitudes towards them and so obsessed with the need to preserve their reputations, that they are likely to risk committing abortion or infanticide:

All Mothers naturally love their Children: but as this is a Passion, and all Passions center in Self-Love, so it may be subdued by any Superiour Passion, to sooth that same Self-Love, which if nothing had interven'd, would have bid her fondle her Offspring. Common Whores, whom all the World knows to be such, hardly ever destroy their Children . . . not because they are less Cruel or more Virtuous, but because they have lost their Modesty to a greater degree, and the fear of Shame makes hardly any impression upon them.<sup>77</sup>

This is, by eighteenth-century standards, a daring foray into a taboo subject, all the more so because of the degree of sympathy expressed for the mother who acts out of the socially invented passion of shame. It is also reminiscent of a passage in Defoe's *Moll Flanders* (1722) in which Moll, inured to shame by a career of bigamous marriage and concubinage, tells the reader that she would never think of terminating a pregnancy or committing passive infanticide by 'farming' unwanted offspring.<sup>78</sup>

Mandeville's discussion here is only incidentally pro-woman, and is primarily directed towards explaining how one kind of self-love (the natural one of women for their children) can be trumped by another, more powerful and socially inculcated kind of self-love (the fear of shame). His larger purpose, in *The Fable of the Bees*, is to develop the argument of Bayle – that men are naturally amoral and pleasure-seeking, and that they become socialised, not by religious prescriptions, but by laws that manage their natural appetites to the mutual advantage of all – into a thorough-going account of the way people really live in a modern city like London.<sup>79</sup>

Mandeville's work, in other words, played a pioneering role in taking forward the exploration of the cultural relativity of moral values, and the *libertinage érudit* of the seventeenth century on to a new, Enlightenment terrain: the analysis of economic behaviour, of the social genesis of moral rules, and the workings of sociability in civilised settings. His was, from the outset, a gendered account of those workings. The *Fable* started life as a short poem, *The Grumbling Hive: or, Knaves Turn'd Honest* (1705) in which Mandeville ironically imagines the economic disaster that would take place if women turned honest and gave up shopping: 'Weavers that join'd rich Silk with Plate/And all the Trades subordinate/Are gone.'<sup>80</sup> Mandeville's sympathies with women were, however, more extensive than this endorsement of their economic usefulness as consumers, and on one occasion he recollected fondly the active participation, less common in England, of women in his native Netherlands in family businesses.<sup>81</sup> Four years later, Mandeville published a work in a female voice, *The Virgin Unmask'd*, which, despite its promisingly erotic title, contained a serious discussion of the War of the Spanish Succession cast in the form of

a dialogue between an elderly spinster and her young niece. Mandeville peppered the dialogue with remarks about the disadvantaged position of women; the aunt Lucinda explains to her niece how men 'have Enslaved our Sex: In Paradiſe, Man and Woman were upon an even Foot', and complains of the lack of female education.<sup>82</sup> The first edition of *The Fable of the Bees* (1714) contained an introduction (in which Mandeville stated his intention to tell men not 'what they should be' but 'what they really are'), an 'Enquiry into the Origin of Moral Virtue', and an apparatus of annotations ('Remarks' numbered alphabetically) to the original *Grumbling Hive* poem.<sup>83</sup> The main target of Mandeville's satire is contemporary moral cant – whether pious, sentimental or stoical – and the way people use it to delude themselves about the selfish passions and drives that really make society work. Looking beyond virtue and vice, he defends the social necessity of many practices which moralists designate as 'vicious', such as prostitution; prosecuting 'Courtezans and Strumpets . . . with as much Rigour as some silly People would have it' only leads to an increased number of seductions or rapes of other women.<sup>84</sup> Deep down, Mandeville insinuates, most people are far more motivated or restrained by considerations of social esteem than by the sanctions of religion or morality.

*The Fable* begins with the 'Enquiry into the Origin of Moral Virtue' which explains how savage man, a creature of unruly passions and appetites, becomes sufficiently self-restrained to live in society. Mandeville regards self-restraint, which Christians and moralists call 'virtue', as an important ingredient of social co-operation, but recognises that it entails an estrangement of man from his own nature, a 'Violence', as he puts it, which men are induced to 'commit upon themselves' by a group of politicians who 'have undertaken to civilise mankind' by manipulating the one potentially sociable passion innate to all human beings, pride.<sup>85</sup> From all this, it is clear that, for Mandeville, the civilising process involves a bending of human nature through a combination of external, legal restraint and subtle, coercive socialisation. The same, Mandeville argues, goes for women who are socialised into gender-specific roles in order to meet the practical requirements of their particular society. He discusses the different upbringings of boys and girls in the context of a general argument about the way in which moralists flatter people into thinking that they must be 'good' in order to be admired. On one occasion he gives a wonderfully vivid description of two little girls learning to be good and co-operative:

When an awkward Girl before she can either Speak or Go, begins after many entreaties to make the first rude Essays of Curt'sying: The Nurse falls in an extasy



of Praise: *There's a delicate Curt'sy! O fine Miss! There's a pretty Lady! Mama! Miss can make a better Curt'sy than her Sister Molly!* The same is echoed over by the Maids, whilst Mama almost hugs the Child to pieces; only Miss *Molly*, who being four Years older, knows how to make a very handsome Curt'sy, wonders at the Perverseness of their Judgment, and swelling with Indignation, is ready to cry at the Injustice that is done her, till be whisper'd in the Ear that it is only to please the Baby, and that she is a Woman; she grows Proud at being let into the Secret . . . These extravagant Praises would by any one, above the Capacity of an Infant, be call'd fulsome Flatteries, and, if you will, abominable Lies; yet Experience teaches us, that by the help of such gross Encomiums, young Misses will be brought to make pretty Curt'sies, and behave themselves womanly much sooner, and with less trouble, than they would without them.<sup>86</sup>

When the girls grow up, Mandeville shows in Remarks L and M, they will become valuable consumers, benefiting, rather than endangering, society as encouragers of 'luxury' so long as politicians keep an eye on the balance of trade.

Thus, the first version of *The Fable of the Bees* presents femininity as one among a number of socially useful learned behaviours in complex, commercial societies, and treats contemporary public sanctimoniousness about female immorality and 'luxury' with implicit disdain.<sup>87</sup> At some stage after publishing the first edition of *The Fable of the Bees* and before publishing the 1723 version with its closing essay, 'A Search into the Nature of Society', Mandeville read Shaftesbury's *Characteristicks* (1711, revised 1714). In response to Shaftesbury's idea of man's natural sociability, Mandeville became less preoccupied with exposing the hypocrisy of those who give the name of 'vice' to socially beneficial practices, than with strengthening his idea of society as an artificial contrivance against Shaftesbury's vision of society as the spontaneous outgrowth of man's natural feelings. One major consequence of this new, anti-Shaftesburian strain of argument, in the 1723 *Fable*, is the far greater prominence given to the subject of women. More than half the revisions are concerned with this subject, which becomes the illustrative focus for Mandeville's contentions about nature and virtue. The first of these occurs in the greatly expanded Remark C on the artificially inculcated passions of honour and shame that motivate soldiers to action and women to modesty. Mandeville states that the modesty of women is the female form of shame, and merely 'the Result of Custom and Education'. It is purely social in orientation, and is designed to teach women to control their sexuality in public. Women are not naturally ashamed of their sexuality, and the blush on the cheek of the young lady disappears when she

contemplates sexual matters in private. They do, however, internalise the social laws of censure, and blush in private if they overhear themselves discussed disrespectfully.<sup>88</sup> Shaftesbury's philosophy gives no place to female desire, whereas Mandeville believes that it is as strong as male desire, but that the laws of 'the Polite and knowing World' demand that it should be more closely concealed.<sup>89</sup> Chastity is a lesson which young girls learn, 'like those of *Grammar*', as they do modesty, and neither is *inherently* virtuous: 'Because Impudence is a Vice, it does not follow that Modesty is a Virtue; it is built upon Shame, a Passion in our Nature, and may be either Good or Bad according to the Actions perform'd from that Motive.'<sup>90</sup>

A self-aware society, less in thrall to religious notions of 'virtue' and Shaftesburian notions of 'politeness', Mandeville appears to argue, would not impose such unnatural sexual self-denial upon women. Not only would a heftier dose of Dutch sexual frankness lessen the incentive to commit abortion or infanticide, but it would also deter wealthier people (whom he scornfully refers to as 'the fashionable Part of Mankind') from inflicting arranged marriages on their daughters. As he observes in the newly added Remark N:

it is the Interest of the Society to preserve Decency and Politeness; that Women should linger, waste, and die, rather than relieve themselves in an unlawful Manner; and among the fashionable Part of Mankind, the People of Birth and Fortune, it is expected, that Matrimony should never be enter'd upon without a curious Regard to Family, Estate, and Reputation, and in the making of Matches the Call of Nature be the very last Consideration.<sup>91</sup>

Mandeville's libertine critique of the effects of contemporary sexual morality upon the lives of women and his sensitivity to the cruelties they endure, had its intellectual roots in the work of Bayle, but also affinities with the contemporary literary libertinage to be found in Manley, Eliza Haywood and other writers of amatory fiction. Their works, similarly, explore the female suffering caused by the tension between women's natural propensity to pleasure and the moral rules (neither transcendent nor natural, but hypocritically and self-servingly imposed by moralising men).<sup>92</sup> In Manley's *Secret History, or Queen Zarah* (1705) one of the male characters refers to sexuality as a 'natural Right', adding (in a way that invites the reader to think of women) that 'they are wretched who enjoy not that Liberty'; and, in her fictionalised autobiography, *The Adventures of Rivella* (1714), she also explores the social workings of the discourse of female 'shame' through the device of a sympathetic but uncomprehending

male narrator.<sup>93</sup> The simple message of Mandeville's writings that there are two sets of rules – the official, religious and moral ones and the real, unacknowledged laws of social behaviour – found echoes in the fictional stories of enterprising harlots from Moll Flanders to Fanny Hill.

From the time of Richardson's *Pamela* (1740), respectable novel writers progressively distanced themselves from libertine views of this kind, but libertinism continued to evolve throughout the century, and to nurture a degree of ethical scepticism and experimentation, especially with regard to orthodox ideas about female sexuality.<sup>94</sup> Gibbon and Hume owed something to this current of philosophical libertinism, as we will see, but, before the very end of the century, only Mandeville made his unconventional, liberal sexual views a platform for practical reform in Britain.<sup>95</sup> A year after the second edition of *The Fable*, he published anonymously a pamphlet entitled *A Modest Defence of Publick Stews* (brothels) in which he developed the case, set out in Remark H of the original *Fable*, for legalised and publicly regulated prostitution as a means of protecting respectable women from seduction and rape. This included a plan for properly supervised brothels in which the women would be protected from violence, and provided with medical facilities to control the pox and to reduce the mortality of their offspring.<sup>96</sup> He also stated that female chastity is unnatural from a physiological point of view, reprising his ideas about female honour as a form of learned behaviour, and elaborating a new notion of 'artificial Chastity':

To counterballance this violent natural Desire, all young women have strong Notions of Honour carefully inculcated into them from their Infancy. Young Girls are taught to hate a *Whore*, before they know what the Word means; and when they grow up, they find their worldly Interest entirely depending upon the Reputation of their Chastity. This Sense of Honour and Interest, is what we may call artificial Chastity; and it is upon this Compound of natural and artificial Chastity, that every Women's real actual Chastity depends.<sup>97</sup>

Mandeville sees how the whore as a figure of 'vice' is necessary to the discursive construction, in his time, of 'real' chastity as the materialisation of a physical state as a social mode of being. Most commentators and conduct book writers of Mandeville's time would have found his alternative notion of 'artificial chastity' pernicious and irreligious, since chastity was generally regarded as one of the 'offices' of women prescribed by natural law. However, there are some striking similarities with Hume's discussion of female chastity in his *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739–40), which he designates as one of the 'artificial' virtues, the product, not of

nature, but of social convention, education, and the requirements of husbands and father'.<sup>98</sup>

Hume is unlikely to have read *A Modest Defence of Publick Stews*, but Mandeville did have a very significant impact upon his thinking, as he did upon Francis Hutcheson, Adam Smith and other Scottish Enlightenment philosophers.<sup>99</sup> Hume criticised Mandeville's argument about the artificial nature of moral and legal rules by suggesting that, far from being imposed by skilful politicians, they came about through the historical evolution of sociability. This development of Mandeville's thinking would have far-reaching consequences. By and large, Mandeville had more to say about the workings of society than about its historical progress, although in his later works, however, his thinking did develop some historical perspectives. For instance, *The Fable of the Bees. Part II* (1729), a dialogue work written in defence of the original *Fable*, outlines, as a historical argument, the idea that rules of morality and codes of behaviour are reinvented at each stage of the civilising process. Mandeville never called this process 'improvement', as his Scottish Enlightenment successors were to do, but this work contains the seeds of an evolutionary account of female virtue in which sexual continence can be read as an index of social development. And in a subsequent dialogue work entitled *An Enquiry into the Origin of Honour* (1732), Mandeville wrote about honour and shame as historically contingent passions, different in meaning and social effect in different societies, such as ancient Rome, barbarian Germany or medieval Europe. One of the interlocutors in this dialogue characterises honour (whose male form is courage and whose female form is chastity) as a fundamentally medieval idea which has survived into the present: 'I make no Doubt, but this Signification of the Word Honour is entirely Gothick, and sprung up in some of the most ignorant Ages of Christianity.'<sup>100</sup> Mandeville was discussed seriously by those, like Hutcheson and Hume, who attempted to account for morality in naturalistic terms, and they followed him in including the ethical categories that pertained to women, such as chastity, compassion and modesty, in their discussions. His work also excited serious, uniformly hostile discussion among the devout, especially those moral rationalists committed to the notion that reason allows us to discover God's immutable moral law. Among these, the celebrated High Church Anglican devotional writer William Law mounted one of the most cogent attacks on Mandeville's work in a pamphlet entitled *Remarks upon a Late Book, Entitled, The Fable of the Bees* (1724), in which he argued that reason does play a vital part in enabling people to act well. Mandeville had suggested that compassion,

far from being a moral behaviour, is merely an impulse of nature to which weak-minded women are particularly prone. Law counters that 'To say that Women have the *weakest Minds*, is saying more than you are able to prove. If they are more inclin'd to Compassion, through a Tenderness of Nature, it is so far from being a *Weakness of their Minds*, that it is a right judgement.'<sup>101</sup> Most of Law's criticisms are levelled at the wrong-headedness of Mandeville's view of history as one in which wise politicians suddenly impose civility on the savages.

## PRELIMINARIES

Whether on historical ground or in relation to his excessive or insufficient ethical naturalism, or to his denial of the reality of benevolence, the terms of the controversy over Mandeville's works were also those of the Enlightenment debate about women. At the heart of the debate was the question as to whether sociability or self-interest was the real basis for society, and, in either case, what was the point of women's entry into the present functioning, past history and progressive future of society itself. The first chapter of this book starts, on the other side of the argument from Mandeville, with those writers who made the case for the benign impact of women upon a social order that depends for its survival, upon individual human virtue and piety. It is concerned with the creation of a Whig Anglican Enlightenment in early to mid eighteenth-century England that was favourable to female learning and female social influence and activity. It begins with the work of Locke, and with the response from his pupil Lord Shaftesbury, from Cambridge Platonist religious writers, and from theologians from Samuel Clarke and Gilbert Burnet to Joseph Butler. It explores the engagement of women writers with the theological and philosophical debates, prompted by their work, about the extent to which we can know God by examining the realm of nature, about the nature of reason, the capacity of reason to access God's moral law, and the sources of our obligation to be virtuous. It also looks at the questions pertaining to the operations of virtue in a social context. In particular, it considers women's response to arguments, between Locke and Shaftesbury, about the sources of moral norms in society, and the degree to which morality has a natural foundation in the human mind. The chapter examines the search, in the work of Mary Astell, Damaris Masham, Elizabeth Burnet and Catharine Cockburn, for an ethics and epistemology hospitable to the rational and moral capacities of women that would enable them to act as philosophers and agents within and

beyond the domestic sphere. It investigates, following both Shaftesbury and Mandeville, the extent to which they considered self-love or benevolence, or a combination of the two as the basis for social co-operation, and the extent to which benevolence, rather than private devotion, ought to be the main business of a purposeful life. The chapter then moves forward in time to the philosophical and devotional writings of the Bluestocking circle of women writers, particularly those of Elizabeth Carter and Catharine Talbot. It seeks to place these within the Latitudinarian Enlightenment, and to show the deep impact upon their work of their friend Butler, one of the most influential moral philosophers of the century, in formulating their ideas of active female virtue, free will and the ability to arrive at a degree of understanding and certainty about this world and the next through the exercise of reason.

Chapter 2 moves to Scotland, where attempts by Enlightenment thinkers to create a science of human culture yielded the most extensive engagement with the role of women ever undertaken in European intellectual history. It begins with moral philosophy, and with the critique of Locke's social contract and of Mandeville by Francis Hutcheson, Hume and Smith. Within a natural law framework, Hutcheson elaborated an inclusive theory of natural benevolence, and of society as the benevolent outgrowth of familial ties, as well as an unusually egalitarian idea of marriage and family life. Hume and Smith rejected the idea of the objective moral realm asserted by Hutcheson, Clarke, Butler and others, and developed naturalistic accounts of virtue as something that arises from our passions. For Hume this included the insight that justice is an 'artificial', rather than a natural virtue (and justice includes, he writes, the injunction to female chastity). With this idea of artificial virtues came the idea of human sociability as a historical development (rather than as the product of a social contract), and, in the writings that followed, of the place of women within that evolving history of moral and legal rules. Most of the chapter is concerned with the development of Scottish 'conjectural history' with its exploration of the relationships between morality, the law and social customs (including, prominently, those that affect the status of women) that naturally occur at different economic stages of society. Natural jurisprudence remains a framework for these discussions, but the chapter identifies two somewhat different lines of enquiry: that of Lord Kames, James Beattie and Dugald Stewart (concerned with the historical emergence of the inner moral sense, including a sense of justice towards women, and also with the blunting of that sense by modern luxury), and that of Smith, his pupil John Millar and William Robertson

(concerned to give an empirical account of the natural progress of society – including the gradual diminution of cruelty to women). South of the border, partly through their close connections to the Bluestocking circle, Beattie, Kames and Stewart had the greater impact. On all these Scottish writers the extensive discussions of women in the work of Montesquieu played an important part, and there was even, in England, a female Montesquieuan, Jemima Kindersley. And there was a shared tendency to see history as a great gender divergence, with male and female roles becoming ever more polarised as societies become more complex, and with an intensification of (not instantly gratified) sexual energies being associated with greater economic productivity. The contrast, in the work of Scottish writers, between complex societies and hunter-gatherer or pastoral tribes, was sharpened by their reading of the new anthropology from France, but often in ways that implicitly excluded the ‘primitive’ peoples described there, with their allegedly brutal treatment of their women, from the European trajectory of progress.

In some of the anthropological writings of the Scottish Enlightenment, as well as later works such as James Dunbar’s *Essays on the History of Mankind* (1780), the study of ‘manners’ became detached from the framework of natural jurisprudence, and linked more closely to the investigation of ethnic and cultural specificity. A similar detachment of economics from moral philosophy and jurisprudence would take place early in the nineteenth century. [Chapter 3](#) explores some of the ways in which this more diffuse notion of manners informed the historical culture of the second half of the eighteenth century, particularly in relation to Britain’s changing sense of its Roman, Ancient British, Celtic, Gothic and medieval pasts, and how women increasingly came to be identified as the carriers of that cultural and ethnic heritage. It tells the paradoxical story of the analytical dilution and historical enrichment of the conjectural history of manners, and of the emergence of more specialised (and in many ways more limited) ideas of women’s roles as guardians and carriers of those manners. It looks at the part played by numerous literary histories, historical works, plays and other literary sources in the development of a gendered ethnic consciousness, and of a sense of temporality that included, but was more complex than, ‘progress’ as women came to be seen as bearing and preserving the traces of the remote past. The genealogical contours of that past, especially, were a matter of vigorous controversy between Scottish, Welsh and English writers – a controversy that invariably included the status and virtue of women in ancient societies, things that were now understood to be key indicators of ethnic personality

and of levels of civilisation. The chapter shows how the ‘Ossian’ debates intersected with wider arguments about Celtic versus Germanic women, and how the emergence from the 1760s of an ideal of Gothic femininity and of female ‘affective patriotism’ served both to confirm and complicate conjectural historical models of European progress. The Roman republican ideal of the austere woman who sacrifices her feelings for the good of the state, although it continued to provide inspiration to writers such as Catharine Macaulay, declined in popularity, succumbing, in part, to a prevailing philosophical climate in which private affections and self-regard were not perceived to be at odds with public benevolence. Gibbon played an important part in this respectful but sceptical re-evaluation of the relevance of Roman history to modern Britain, as well as providing his own highly original analysis of the appalling legal predicament of women in ancient Rome. The final part of the chapter is concerned with the rediscovery of medieval chivalry, in the wake of Scottish Enlightenment history, and also of literary and antiquarian scholarship by Sainte-Palaye (and his translator Susannah Dobson), George, Baron Lyttelton (assisted by his friend Elizabeth Montagu), Thomas Percy, Thomas Warton, Beattie, Clara Reeve and others, as the legacy of Gothic manners. Chivalry was for them as later for Burke, the defining and enduring characteristic of Europe’s gender order, the forerunner of civilised manners, and the model for social relations more generally. The revival of chivalry as an ideal reached its height in the 1820s, and its enduring legacy was the creation of the idea of the lady as a kind of inherited, historically venerable rank to which all women can aspire. Although some women writers and readers readily took the chance for cultural and moral guardianship that the cult of chivalry afforded, others, notably Wollstonecraft and Macaulay, deplored it as a means of writing women out of the history of social progress.

Macaulay, the most effective critic of Burke’s chivalry and the major female historian of the eighteenth century, is the subject of a dedicated [chapter 4](#). A committed radical republican who believed that there had been no real improvements in English politics or society since the end of the Commonwealth, Macaulay fits awkwardly into a British Enlightenment concerned with the progress of society. Before her final *Letters on Education* (1790), she expressed little overt interest in the progress of women. Modern commentators have either puzzled over her seemingly gender-blind assumption of masculine republicanism, or have explored the strategies through which she laid claim to female political spokespersonship. This chapter seeks to establish, through a detailed reading of her historical works, that



Macaulay set out to modernise the classical idea of liberty in the light of Enlightenment ideas (particularly those of Hume) about the social and economic forces that shape historical development; that she formulated her own 'science of politics' by reviving, in opposition to Hume and others, Locke's idea of the right of resistance to authority permissible within the social contract; that she sought to combine Locke's ideas of individuals asserting their rights with classical notions of active, vigilant citizenship in ways that accorded a role for all men and women in the improvement of the nation's political culture; and that, above all, she promoted the idea of rational self-cultivation as a qualification for citizenship, including, she strongly hints, citizenship for women. These political ideas are underscored by Macaulay's theological writings which, in the tradition of Clarke and Cockburn, locate the moral obligation to act for the public good in the objective, eternal distinctions between right and wrong by which God himself is constrained. Like her Latitudinarian predecessors, she argues that these distinctions are discoverable by our reason, and that morality is a matter of rationality not, as for Scottish moral philosophers, of sentiment. She parts company with her predecessors, however, when she declares that morality is also a matter of 'necessity', and that we do not have free will to choose the bad once reason has allowed us to understand the good.

Education, for Macaulay, plays a vital role in allowing us to determine our true 'rational interest' and so inevitably to follow the right moral and political path. This was the subject of her last work, the *Letters on Education* (1790), which had a considerable impact on Wollstonecraft in its analysis of the processes of moral cognition, of the distorted, excessively gender-specific personal identities produced by the current state of education and manners, and of the potential for female education to hasten the progress of civilisation. Chapter 5 shows how, following Macaulay, Wollstonecraft adapted the British Enlightenment languages of manners and conjectural history to a powerful critique of the denigration of women in modern society. Wollstonecraft set out to reverse the Enlightenment tendency – taken to extremes by modern writers on chivalry, and absorbed into Rousseau's account of women's supporting role in the creation of male citizens – to judge manners by their social effects, rather than by their moral content, and to treat femininity as a kind of rank, or ascribed social identity. She linked this, in her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, and also in her later *Historical View* of the French Revolution and in her account of Sweden, to a historical analysis of modern Europe as at once hyper-civilised and feudally retarded, and having

failed to realise the benefits of the commercial stage. Wollstonecraft's solutions, it is argued, were more gradualist than revolutionary, in that she thought that an individual female and male reclaiming of moral autonomy, followed by reformation and realignment of morality and manners, needed to precede political change, and to bring about the implementation of civil and political rights, as had happened in America. In her beliefs about morality – as a matter of rational choice and reflection, not sentiment, and as issuing from an objective moral realm – Wollstonecraft was very much a thinker in the late Latitudinarian tradition, particularly as it was mediated by her minister Richard Price. In seeking to reintegrate, for feminist purposes, this theology of individual rational autonomy with the language of manners and the progress of society, Wollstonecraft's work exposes, with particular clarity, the tensions between the Scottish and English strains of Enlightenment, and between the idea of society as a product of self-interest or as an aggregate of private affections and public benevolence. She acknowledges the commercial stage to be the one most likely to deliver a better life for women, yet insists that women's stake in that kind of society cannot simply be as pleasers, socialisers and consumers. Their private affections and moral conduct must be connected to public benefits to enable them to become fully themselves, and to enable the state to reach a higher state of civilisation. Most of Wollstonecraft's female predecessors advocated this civic integration in terms of philanthropic benevolence, but she was the first, in Britain, to say that, for women's 'private virtue' to become a 'public benefit, they must have a civil existence in the state, married or single' (see pp. 184–5).

The final chapter looks forward to the nineteenth century, and to the ways in which the idea of the progress of society (for men as well as women) fragmented and regrouped in the years following the Napoleonic wars. It is in two separate parts, one concerned with women historians, the other with women and political economy in the wake of T. R. Malthus's *Essay on the Principle of Population*. A common context for both parts is the rising influence of Scottish Common Sense philosophy, of the kind promoted by Montagu and her circle, and in particular of the Edinburgh philosopher Dugald Stewart and his circle (including Maria Edgeworth, Anna Laetitia Barbauld and Elizabeth Hamilton); also the decline of the Latitudinarian Anglican consensus in religious thinking (despite the considerable success of the work of William Paley), the ongoing rise of Evangelicalism, and the temporary defeat, in the first two decades of the century, of Enlightenment philosophical Whiggism by a new

'throne-and-altar' ideology. The first part explores the ways in which a generation of women historians made money out of the Enlightenment association between women and history, and the promotion, by Blue-stocking writers such as Hester Chapone and Sarah Scott, of history as an essential part of women's education. The chapter records the considerable contribution of women historians and authors of semi-fictional history, such as Hamilton, Ellis Cornelia Knight and Susannah Dobson, to the further expansion of the affective, imaginatively engaging possibilities of the history of 'manners'. It shows how later historians, such as Mary Berry, continued their work of rewriting the history of female 'influence' in the domain of manners, not in terms of unintended sexual agency, but in relation to a progressive narrative of their spiritual, rational and benevolent social agency. It explores the elevation, in this period, of certain female exemplars (notably the seventeenth-century Roundhead supporter, Lucy Hutchinson) as nationally serviceable points of sympathetic entry into history. And it gives an overview of works, by Mary Hays, Lucy Aikin, Elizabeth Bengier, in two emerging genres of women's popular history – royal biography and art history – paving the way for women's dominance in this field from the mid nineteenth century onwards. In the case of biographies of queens and princesses, these works can be characterised as extending the Enlightenment history of manners into new, emotional territory. Far from simply creating a niche area for women historians, these histories gave emblematic significance to the stories of elite women, who found themselves in positions of immense influence through no endeavour of their own, having to make hard choices but, at least, assured of historical recognition for those choices. Over and above the possibilities they offered to women readers, these histories, in dramatising the encounter between a responsible individual and the intractable, opaque world of power, gave a privileged role to the female character in history in mediating the national past, and a sense of what it feels like to be a pawn in the progress of society.

The second part of this chapter begins with Jane Austen's ambivalent attitude towards history, and her scepticism, despite her intense engagement with the social workings of manners, about whether society actually progresses. In some respects, her work approximates to a late, Malthusian version of the Enlightenment in its endorsement of the possibility of improvement within the limits imposed by the economy, warfare and numbers of people. Malthus is discussed as a figure of the Enlightenment, broadly hospitable to Latitudinarian natural theology (although ever sceptical about the possibility of human benevolence), and deeply, if

sometimes critically, engaged with what his Scottish forebears had to say about women as beneficiaries or victims of social progress. Malthus's work inevitably placed female reproduction at the heart of political economy. When, in the revised version of his *Essay*, he emphasised 'moral restraint' as an alternative to over-population, he discussed the changes in social attitudes towards women that would need to come about to make this an effective strategy. Other population theorists, such as Stewart, saw female education as an important intervention in social progress. The entanglement, in the debates about population, of female education, political economy and social progress encouraged some women writers – among them Priscilla Wakefield, Jane Marcet, Hannah More and, later, Harriet Martineau – to regard political economy as *in itself* a form of female education. Yet, in the figure of More, in particular, we reach the limits of Enlightenment: committed, as second-generation Bluestocking, to the ideals of rational autonomy and female education, she nevertheless contributed to the transformation of the Enlightenment project for the progress of society into one in which the lower orders of society were 'progressed' by their spiritually enlightened 'betters'.