

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-65098-4 - Women and Achievement in Nineteenth-Century Europe

Linda L. Clark

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction: women and achievement, reality and rhetoric

What could a nineteenth-century European woman do, or not do, if she sought special activity, purpose, or recognition beyond her own home? As in other times and places, possibilities for individual women often were enhanced or restricted by many of the determinants that shaped the lives of their fathers, brothers, husbands, or sons. Social class, education, religion, ethnicity, race, and place of residence were important determinants, as was the nature of a person's upbringing and developing sense of self-worth. Unlike men, however, women also faced restrictions based on *gender* – that is, on a set of socially constructed beliefs about their physical and psychological nature and appropriate roles. Many, if not most, contemporaries believed that gender traits stemmed from biological differences created by God or nature. Accordingly, public authorities, opinion brokers, and families cited custom, law, and scientific premises to justify restricting many women to roles presumably suited to their distinctive traits. Indeed, many historians argue, nineteenth-century delineations of gender traits and roles became in some respects more rigid than in earlier eras.

During the nineteenth century, Europeans in industrializing countries increasingly defined women's sphere of activity as the private space of the household and men's sphere as the public space. Two familiar explanations for this delineation of roles and spheres highlight the legacy of the French Revolution and the impact of industrialization. The French Revolution excluded women from the new political rights awarded to men as voters, even as it promoted an ideology of universal and equal rights that some women would try to claim for their sex. Industrialization led to more separation of the home from the workplace, although the extent to which this affected and changed women's income-producing work varied by country, time period, and individuals' marital status. To these two causal explanations historians have added discussions of how elites fearful of political and economic change tried to shore up the status quo by placing new emphasis on mothers' roles as the first shapers of the values of the next generation. Historian Joan Scott, among others, also

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-65098-4 - Women and Achievement in Nineteenth-Century Europe

Linda L. Clark

Excerpt

[More information](#)

2 Women and Achievement in Nineteenth-Century Europe

has argued that the very rhetoric of separate spheres for men and women was itself a cause of new restrictions on women in the labor force.¹

Yet despite the common rhetorical separation of the masculine and public sphere from the feminine and domestic sphere, lines between the public and private spheres were, in reality, often blurred. Thus historians must reckon with more than one kind of difference between familiar rhetoric and nineteenth-century actuality. For example, European countries, to varying degrees, noticeably expanded educational opportunities for girls and young women as well as for boys and young men. Although schools typically perpetuated familiar assumptions about appropriate gender roles, women whose mental horizons were expanded by instruction at home or in school might become uncomfortable with some, if not all, aspects of gender ideology. To justify engaging in activities that were somehow “public” in nature, women, and supportive men, frequently cited common notions about feminine qualities and argued that in certain “public” roles those special qualities might serve the general good. Such was the case with many nineteenth-century descriptions of women teachers’ “maternal” work with children. Similar characterizations applied to nurses or pioneering social workers as well. Indeed, teachers and other nineteenth-century employed women from middling or lower-middle-class backgrounds often simply translated older descriptions of the activities of charitable or religious women to a professional realm. More unusual, of course, were those women who defied convention and tried not only to enter a supposedly masculine realm of activity but also to gain public recognition for their endeavors. Women authors, artists, scholars, scientists, and professionals with advanced training illustrate this kind of exceptional achievement, for which some pre-nineteenth-century precedents existed. When feminist organizations developed during the later nineteenth century, their goals commonly included improvements in women’s legal status and education, plus access to more, and better paid, types of employment. For many feminists, political rights seemed a more daring goal and so were usually added later rather than sooner to organizations’ formal agendas.

This book traces the ways in which European women from more than one kind of background sought to overcome the much-discussed divide between public and private spheres by seeking more recognition for the “public” value of their traditional activities and also by demanding and

¹ Joan Wallach Scott, “The Woman Worker,” in *Emerging Feminism from Revolution to World War*, ed. Genevieve Fraisse and Michelle Perrot, vol. IV of *A History of Women in the West*, ed. Georges Duby and Michelle Perrot (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), 419–44. See also Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-65098-4 - Women and Achievement in Nineteenth-Century Europe

Linda L. Clark

Excerpt

[More information](#)

gaining access to new opportunities in cultural and professional fields. It reveals how determined women managed to negotiate social, cultural, attitudinal, or legal restrictions on their sex and to expand the limits of what was possible for themselves and later generations of women. The focus on women and achievements often places women from middle- and upper-class backgrounds in the spotlight. Yet some women of more modest social origins also managed to achieve upward social mobility and public recognition as a result of new educational opportunities or by exercising special talents, especially in cultural endeavors. The study of “achievers” is not intended to suggest to readers that they are intrinsically more meritorious than the millions of women whose names are lost from the historical record. More on the circumstances faced by working-class women can be found in Rachel Fuchs’s volume on *Gender and Poverty in Nineteenth-Century Europe* in this Cambridge University Press series. Recent historians of women have often criticized, and appropriately, earlier treatments of women’s history that simply catalogued “women worthies” and ignored all of the others. But when women of achievement are studied within larger political, social, economic, and cultural contexts, it is possible to explore how women tested the limits on restrictions long presumed to hold women back. Furthermore, the importance of women setting precedents should not be minimized. While many women did not want the notoriety often attached to public activities, such as was long the case for acclaimed actresses and singers, others could find hope for attaining their own goals precisely because someone else had already done so.

Like many studies of nineteenth-century European topics, this volume covers the “long” nineteenth century, beginning with the French Revolution of 1789 and concluding with the start of World War I in 1914. Chapter 1 explores the impact of the French Revolution on possibilities for women by examining some features of Old Regime society and then noting changes tied to the Revolution and the Napoleonic aftermath. Then follow chapters on women writers, women in the arts, women exerting “caring power” through charitable and reform activities, women and education, women and professions, and, finally, women’s organizations promoting feminist agendas. Although Chapters 2 through 7 are thematic, they are sequenced to treat, first, areas in which some eighteenth-century women had been active, such as literature and the arts, and then to examine later pursuits. Within chapters, topics are sequenced chronologically when appropriate.

Throughout the text, readers will note discussion of how women justified crossing gender barriers to enter types of activity previously closed to women or seen as unsuitable for them. At first glance, such

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-65098-4 - Women and Achievement in Nineteenth-Century Europe

Linda L. Clark

Excerpt

[More information](#)

4 Women and Achievement in Nineteenth-Century Europe

justifications often seem to fall into two categories: the right of women to be treated as equals; or the right of women, as women, to do something that would benefit from the input of women's special qualities. The latter position is often termed one of seeking "equality in difference," as Karen Offen has noted in her studies of European feminism.² Frequently, however, individual women or organizations utilized a mixture of justifications, the exact emphasis depending upon the chronological moment, national setting, or audience being addressed.

Of necessity, the women and groups presented here frequently come from the more often studied major countries, or emerging nations, of France, England, Germany, and Italy, and in the cases of Austria (Austria-Hungary after 1867) and Russia, from the nationalities therein dominant. Comparative examples are also offered from the Low Countries, Scandinavia, Iberia, the Balkans, and minority nationalities in Austria and Russia, as well as from European encounters with parts of the nonwestern world. Some brief individual biographies are included to help highlight possibilities for women in a given type of endeavor or national context and to shed light on factors allowing for achievement. Appropriately, one may question how representative of other women's lives an individual story is. Nonetheless, historical work in recent years has witnessed a revival of biographical studies which allow for the capturing of complexities, in individual lives or in contexts, that are not readily apparent in works of social history emphasizing characteristics of groups and analysis of social class. The "new" biography, broadly defined, recognizes that individuals often have multiple identities and that individual lives must be understood within a large context that includes political, economic, cultural, religious, and, of course, gender realities.³

² Karen Offen, "Defining Feminism: A Comparative Historical Perspective," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 14 (Autumn 1988): 119–57; Karen Offen, *European Feminisms, 1700–1950: A Political History* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000).

³ For example, Jo Burr Margadant, *The New Biography: Performing Femininity in Nineteenth-Century France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-65098-4 - Women and Achievement in Nineteenth-Century Europe

Linda L. Clark

Excerpt

[More information](#)

1 Women and the revolutionary era: negotiating public and private spaces, 1760s–early 1800s

Article One of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen, issued by the French National Assembly in August 1789, proclaimed that “All men are born and remain free and equal in rights.” Two years later Olympe de Gouges (1748–93), a humbly born former actress and aspiring playwright, offered a revised version in her Declaration of the Rights of Woman: “Woman is born free and remains equal to man in rights.”¹

Both statements on individual rights illustrate why the French Revolution in 1789 has long been considered the start of not only modern French history but also modern European history. Revolutionary advocacy for equal rights and individual freedom launched a new democratic era in European political and social history. By setting precedents for undercutting royal and aristocratic power, the Revolution inspired later generations of reformers and revolutionaries in France and elsewhere in Europe. French revolutionaries’ theoretical commitment to equality led to the abolition of the Old Regime’s legally defined class structure, the basis for inequities in its tax structure. Indeed, the widening debate over taxation and related issues of fairness and representation between 1787 and 1789 contributed directly to the start of the Revolution. In place of the previous legal division of society into the first estate (clergy), second estate (aristocracy), and third estate (commoners), revolutionaries envisioned a single category of citizens. On 17 June 1789, determined members of the third estate delegation, elected to the Estates General convened in May, called for retitling the Estates General the National Assembly, much to the dismay of King Louis XVI and many aristocrats. Also eliminated between 1789 and 1791 were distinctions between the rights of the Catholic majority and Protestant and Jewish minorities, a change paralleled by a greater

¹ Olympe de Gouges, “The Declaration of the Rights of Woman,” in *The French Revolution and Human Rights: A Brief Documentary History*, ed. Lynn Hunt (Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin’s Press, 1996), 125.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-65098-4 - Women and Achievement in Nineteenth-Century Europe

Linda L. Clark

Excerpt

[More information](#)

6 Women and Achievement in Nineteenth-Century Europe

secularization of society and attitudes. In the name of economic freedom, the Assembly in 1791 abolished guilds, which had protected artisans' interests but also restricted individuals' ability to enter various occupations. The massive revolt by slaves in the Caribbean colony of Saint-Domingue (modern-day Haiti) prompted the Convention, the more radical revolutionary body elected after the overthrow of the monarchy in 1792, to abolish slavery in 1794. Through such enactments the French Revolution, like the earlier American Revolution, launched a new political era in western civilizations.

But where do women fit into the French Revolution, the eventual exporting of the Revolution to other countries, and its aftermath? Was the Revolution as progressive a development for women as for men? De Gouges's statement on women's rights, unlike the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen, was not adopted by any revolutionary assembly. Furthermore, de Gouges herself was guillotined during the Convention's Reign of Terror (1793–94), her execution occurring nineteen days after that of Queen Marie Antoinette, to whom she dedicated her declaration. Some historians and political theorists, such as Joan Landes, see the fate of the widowed de Gouges, a butcher's daughter, as part of the evidence that the Revolution was not only less progressive for women than for men but actually diminished women's status.² That critical perspective on gender and the Revolution has fueled much recent debate, particularly since France's 1989 celebration of the bicentennial of the Revolution. It was not a completely novel view, however. Some women made similar observations in nineteenth-century memoirs, but over time their judgments fell into obscurity, dismissed by historians in later democratic eras as the complaints of disgruntled aristocrats or former beneficiaries of royal patronage who lost status or wealth because of the Revolution.

Weighing the French Revolution's short-term and long-term impact on women necessitates examination of multiple issues. The Revolution did not empower women as voters, but simply noting that fact does not adequately address the complexity of changes in society, the economy, and culture during the dramatic decade of 1789–99 and its aftermath. It is necessary, first, to look backward into eighteenth-century social and cultural realities, before the Revolution turned the pre-1789 Bourbon monarchy into the Old Regime (*ancien régime*). Then the revolutionaries' record on women's rights and that record's relationship to both previous realities and revolutionary pronouncements on universal rights require

² Joan B. Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1988).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-65098-4 - Women and Achievement in Nineteenth-Century Europe

Linda L. Clark

Excerpt

[More information](#)

assessment. The French Revolution is not the first major historical development whose significance may seem different, in some respects, when assessed for its impact on women. Joan Kelly-Gadol's provocative question "Did women have a Renaissance?" similarly spurred discussion of whether ostensibly progressive features of the European Renaissance, including literary humanism, were as beneficial for women as for men between 1350 and 1600.³

Exceptional eighteenth-century women

What influence or power could women wield in France or elsewhere in Europe before 1789? Traditional European societies were typically hierarchical: social classes were legally defined, and rights or privileges were awarded on the basis of aristocratic birth or rank. Such practices became unacceptable to later democracies, which accord rights to individuals regardless of social status. Yet the unequal distribution of privileges in traditional societies allowed some women to become exceptions to general norms. Their exceptional activities also could provoke backlash, however, and spur efforts to tighten regulations to prevent more women from achieving renown or special status.

Some women became rulers before 1789, their status derived from birth or marriage. France's Salic law, invented during a disputed fourteenth-century royal succession, barred queens from ruling in their own right, but the reigns of England's Queen Elizabeth I (1558–1603) and the Austrian Empress Maria Theresa set different precedents. Mother of Marie Antoinette, Maria Theresa reigned for forty years (1740–80), surviving challenges to her right to rule during the War of the Austrian Succession. In Russia the 34-year reign of Catherine II ("the Great") began in 1762 after her husband, Tsar Peter III, was killed in a palace coup that she helped orchestrate; and she was not the first empress. Indeed, some historians contend that gender stereotypes were then less deeply ingrained in Russia than elsewhere in Europe, although others disagree. Peter I ("the Great") set the stage for women ruling Russia for two-thirds of the eighteenth century when his wife Catherine became his designated successor (1725–27). His niece Anna assumed the throne in 1730; and in 1741 Elizabeth, Peter's never-married daughter, began a twenty-year reign, during which she arranged for her nephew and successor to marry a young German princess – the future Catherine II. Cosmopolitan in

³ Joan Kelly-Gadol, "Did Women Have a Renaissance?" in *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, ed. Renate Bridenthal and Claudia Koonz (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977), 137–64.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-65098-4 - Women and Achievement in Nineteenth-Century Europe

Linda L. Clark

Excerpt

[More information](#)

8 Women and Achievement in Nineteenth-Century Europe

cultural tastes, Catherine II became known for her westernizing policies. Yet Russian elites were the primary beneficiaries of her enactments, for serfdom, largely gone from western Europe, remained deeply entrenched. Catherine's interests included upper-class girls' education, and she found a French model in St. Cyr, a girls' school started in 1686 by Françoise de Maintenon, second wife of Louis XIV.

For France, judgments about women's power or influence before the Revolution often highlight their role in the salons, those social gatherings in private residences where aristocrats and upper-middle-class people, the *bourgeoisie*, often mingled in a "republic of letters." A feature of the Parisian social landscape since the 1660s under Louis XIV, salons became a notable setting for discussing contemporary concerns, including arguments in texts by prominent eighteenth-century Enlightenment authors. By the second half of the eighteenth century, salons, like the press, were central to the development of what Jürgen Habermas termed a new "public sphere," positioned between the royal court and the larger society and important for the airing of views on numerous governmental and social issues.⁴ Indeed, the term "public opinion" (*l'opinion publique*) came into usage by the 1750s. Men and women mingled in salons, as did aristocrats and bourgeois, and such women as Marie-Thérèse Geoffrin (1699–1777) and Suzanne Necker (1739–94), wife of Louis XVI's Swiss-born finance minister, were not only hostesses but also facilitators of discussion. The now familiar usage of the term *salon* to connote a kind of intellectual sociability, with hostesses designated as *salonnières*, developed somewhat later, however. Originally a salon was simply a room for social gatherings. As commentators later perceived salons' influence to be waning, the term *salon*, like the term Old Regime, became useful for characterizing pre-revolutionary society. Thus in 1800, Germaine de Staël, the Neckers' daughter, recalled the importance of intellectual interchanges for "distinguished men in all spheres" under the former monarchy and also women's contribution: "The influence of women is necessarily very great when all events occur in salons, and all character is revealed in words; in such a state of affairs, women are a power, and what is pleasing to them is cultivated."⁵

Because France remained the pacesetter in many areas of European culture, as it had been during Louis XIV's long reign, the salon inspired emulators in other capital cities. Reacting against earlier Russian cultural

⁴ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1989).

⁵ Quoted in Madelyn Gutwirth, *Madame de Staël, Novelist: The Emergence of the Artist as a Woman* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978), 4.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-65098-4 - Women and Achievement in Nineteenth-Century Europe

Linda L. Clark

Excerpt

[More information](#)

and religious traditions, including the social separation of the sexes, the westernizing Tsar Peter I encouraged women's presence at aristocratic gatherings in St. Petersburg. In London after 1750, Elizabeth Montagu (1720–1800), wife of an aristocrat, was among the hostesses whose gatherings invited comparison with French salons. Similar events in Madrid were called *tertulias*. Some late eighteenth-century Berlin salons brought Christians and Jews together in the homes of prosperous Jewish families, such as Henriette and Marcus Herz. French had replaced Latin as the *lingua franca* of educated European elites by 1700, and reading publics in London, Madrid, Berlin, Vienna, and St. Petersburg were familiar with leading French authors. In the wake of the seventeenth-century scientific “revolution,” which replaced the Aristotelian-Ptolemaic model of an Earth-centered universe with one Sun-centered, the French and other Europeans could regard stimulating contemporary debates on philosophical, social, and political issues as indicative of an Age of Reason or a *siècle des lumières* (century of lights), termed in German the *Aufklärung* (Enlightenment) and in Italian *Illuminismo*.

The cultural prominence of salons, and women's role in them, also inspired critics. Already in 1687 the Abbé François de Salignac de la Mothe Fénelon's famous treatise on education for aristocratic girls at St. Cyr prescribed an emphasis on their future domestic duties as wives and mothers in order to counter the worldliness of Parisian salon society. Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78) mocked the salon as “a harem of men more womanish” than their hostess,⁶ and his pedagogical treatise *Émile* (1762) ridiculed and chastised the educated women who aspired to be men's intellectual equals. In England, learned women frequenting literary salons were mocked as unattractive “bluestockings” or *bas-bleus*, the equivalent French term. Initially a humorous label for a male scholar who attended Montagu's salon wearing working-class blue cotton stockings rather than a gentleman's dress stockings, the term also signified a serious attitude rather than aristocratic frivolity. Although Hannah More, a schoolmaster's daughter, celebrated Montagu's circle in her long poem *The Bas Bleu* (1786), the label soon became pejorative and applied only to women. The German philosopher Immanuel Kant warned in *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (1764) that too much learning made women ugly. Mocking two French women, Anne Dacier, a translator of ancient classics, and the Marquise Émilie du Châtelet, translator of Isaac Newton's *Principia Mathematica*, Kant wrote

⁶ Quoted in Dena Goodman, “Women and the Enlightenment,” in *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, 3rd edn., ed. Renate Bridenthal, Susan Mosher Stuard, and Merry E. Wiesner (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), 256.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-65098-4 - Women and Achievement in Nineteenth-Century Europe

Linda L. Clark

Excerpt

[More information](#)

10 Women and Achievement in Nineteenth-Century Europe

that they “might as well even have a beard.”⁷ In Rousseau’s *Émile*, Sophie, the fictional companion for the young hero, was educated for domesticity and motherhood. “A woman’s education,” Rousseau intoned, “must therefore be planned in relation to man,” to enable her to “be pleasing in his sight, to win his respect and love, to train him in childhood, to tend him in manhood, . . . to make his life pleasant and happy.”⁸ Restrictive as that message was, many contemporary women nonetheless saw in *Émile* a new valorization of their maternal roles, for Rousseau emphasized that mothers played a crucial part in children’s moral and physical development. Some women also recognized inherent problems or dangers in his prescriptive limits for women’s education and behavior, however, among them Stéphanie de Genlis.

Denunciations of women who stepped out of their prescribed social place were not novel in the later eighteenth century. They had both classical and biblical roots. In ancient Greece, Aristotle grounded separate gender roles and women’s formal exclusion from public life in notions about men’s intellectual, moral, and physical superiority. Defining the family as the basic unit of society, he assigned leadership of the family and civic society to men. Judeo-Christian biblical texts also provided rationales for women’s subordination to men, beginning with Eve’s punishment for making Adam sin. Christian texts did speak about the spiritual equality of the sexes, but the apostle Paul formally enjoined women to keep silent in churches. In ancient Rome, the satirist Juvenal compared learned matrons who voiced opinions at dinner parties to clanging bells. Although Plato had called for educating both men and women of the elite “guardian” class imagined for his ideal Republic, it was the Aristotelian gender polarities that medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas combined with the biblical in his *Summa Theologica* (1266). When the Italian Renaissance extended medieval universities’ emphasis on Latin and classics for educated men, such gender polarities continued to figure in European humanists’ pedagogical treatises. Admittedly, Baldesar Castiglione’s *Book of the Courtier* (1528), a widely translated guide to upper-class comportment in Renaissance courts, recommended comparable instruction in letters and arts for both sexes, but Castiglione also assumed that while men’s knowledge would impress princely employers, women’s learning enhanced their ability to organize social gatherings. Furthermore, many religious and secular spokesmen continued to question whether such learning was useful or even morally appropriate for women, even upper-class women.

⁷ Excerpt from Kant in *History of Ideas on Woman*, ed. Rosemary Agonito (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1977), 131.

⁸ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Émile*, trans. B. Foxley (New York: Dutton, 1972), 328.