

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-77427-7 - Women and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century Britain

Karen O'Brien

Excerpt

[More information](#)

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)¹

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

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-77427-7 - Women and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century Britain

Karen O'Brien

Excerpt

[More information](#)

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

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-77427-7 - Women and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century Britain

Karen O'Brien

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: the progress of society*

3

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.'² 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.³ 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

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-77427-7 - Women and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century Britain

Karen O'Brien

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Robertson, Roy Porter and Jonathan Israel.⁴ 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.⁵ 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.⁶ 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).⁷ 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'.⁸ 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.⁹ 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*.¹⁰ Young's specific focus is upon the liberal, anti-dogmatic and scientifically informed world of Anglican divines who variously adapted Newtonian physics and Lockean

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-77427-7 - Women and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century Britain

Karen O'Brien

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: the progress of society*

5

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.¹¹ 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.¹²

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.¹³ 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'.¹⁴ 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'.¹⁵ 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

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-77427-7 - Women and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century Britain

Karen O'Brien

Excerpt

[More information](#)

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.¹⁶ 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

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-77427-7 - Women and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century Britain

Karen O'Brien

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: the progress of society*

7

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

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-77427-7 - Women and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century Britain

Karen O'Brien

Excerpt

[More information](#)

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 Hobbesian 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'.¹⁷ 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.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-77427-7 - Women and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century Britain

Karen O'Brien

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: the progress of society*

9

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.¹⁸ 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.¹⁹ 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.²⁰ 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.²¹ 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.²² 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.²³

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-77427-7 - Women and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century Britain

Karen O'Brien

Excerpt

[More information](#)

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).²⁴ 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.²⁵ 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.²⁶ 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.²⁷ 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'.²⁸ 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'.²⁹ One reason for this apparent vacuum at the heart of middle-class separate spheres ideology is, she suggests, that 'domesticity gains