

## THE WOMAN QUESTION IN FRANCE, 1400–1870

This is a revolutionary reinterpretation of the French past from the early fifteenth century to the establishment of the Third Republic, focused on public challenges and defenses of masculine hierarchy in relations between women and men. Karen Offen surveys heated exchanges around women’s “influence”; their exclusion from “authority”; the increasing prominence of biomedical thinking and population issues; concerns about education, intellect, and the sexual politics of knowledge; and the politics of women’s work. Initially, the majority of commentators were literate and influential men. However, as more and more women attained literacy, they too began to analyze their situation in print and to contest men’s claims about who women were and should be and what they should be restrained from doing, and why. As urban print culture exploded and revolutionary ideas of “equality” fuelled women’s claims for emancipation, this question resonated throughout francophone Europe and, ultimately, across the seas.

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FRANCE, 1400–1870

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*I dedicate this volume to my ever supportive husband of fifty-plus years, George R. Offen. Without his unflagging encouragement and sustaining belief in the promise of my historical scholarship (or at least his respect for my pursuit of the missing voices), this book would never have been completed. I thank him, first, for offering to carry my books, then for discovering the existence of the Bibliothèque Marguerite Durand in Paris, for sharing the journey and helping to raise our daughters while I was excavating sources in the archives and libraries, and especially for being, in my eyes at least, the kindest and most considerate male-feminist lover, companionate spouse, and adventure travel companion a woman could ever wish for.*

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## *Preface*

Writing about French history, especially as an outsider, is not an enterprise for the faint-hearted.

Siân Reynolds, 1996

This volume and its companion volume, *Debating the Woman Question in the French Third Republic, 1870–1920*, represent the results of an empirical, detailed work of scholarship, the product of a life's work. This volume provides *reconnaissance*, documenting the emergence and development of a cluster of themes in the debates (written and published in French) on the woman question that span roughly 450 years. These themes and the manner in which they are articulated reveal the particularities of the status of French women (both single and married) and the peculiarities of the surrounding culture, particularities and peculiarities that provoke and inform controversies over the woman question under the French monarchies and in neighboring Francophone lands. I have written it with general readers in mind as well as those with expertise in French history.

One unusual feature of this volume is that it breaks with conventional political chronology by bridging the French Revolution as well as several other early nineteenth-century efforts to contest monarchical rule. What I intend here is to provide a history of a debate that spans what French historians refer to as “ruptures” even as it contributes to our appreciation of a monarchical “longue durée” that includes the First Empire of Napoléon, the Bourbon Restoration, the July Monarchy, and the Second Empire of Napoléon III. The debates on the woman question are tightly tied to the contestation of authoritarian government and the repeated attempts to achieve some form of democratic rule under a republic. Thus, this volume should not be seen as a mere prologue to the ensuing debates on the woman question during the French Third Republic, which provides a more hospitable model of government but attempts to sink its roots in a turbulent and rapidly evolving economic and cultural context.

Indeed, my point in elaborating at length on the important themes in the debates over the earlier four centuries (prior to, during, and following the Revolution through the Second Empire) is grounded in the realization that *no aspect of the debates on the woman question actually began with the Third Republic*. This volume demonstrates, evidence in hand, that the woman question debates (in manuscript and ultimately in print forms) were underway in French-speaking lands for centuries prior to the Revolution and, also, that they would gain both amplitude and magnitude as they benefitted from – and incorporated – the ultimately revolutionary vocabulary of liberty, equality, and justice, within a framework provided by the enormous political, economic, social, and cultural changes of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that extended throughout western and central Europe. Scholars of early modernity and the Enlightenment know about the earlier debates, but they rarely connect their findings to developments in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Nor do scholars of gender politics during the French Revolution follow the debates into the nineteenth century. Conversely, historians of the Third Republic (and later) do not, for the most part, make the connections of these debates in the early modern or immediate post-revolutionary period. Thus, the seven chapters in this volume will serve to bring the “modernists” up to speed on the development of the themes over time and will demonstrate the continuities that transcend customary historical periodization. They will also facilitate the understanding of the tight connections to the earlier periods for those whose knowledge is concentrated on the Third Republic (and its successor regimes). Above all, this approach will highlight the finding that these debates are extremely political and that they seem to recur in every generation.

Following the proclamation of the Republic in September 1870 and the Paris Commune, the amplification of the debates during the first fifty years of the French Third Republic, will be addressed in my companion volume (mentioned earlier) by paying far closer attention to chronological and contextual developments, for which we have far more evidence than we do for the earlier centuries about the participants in the debates and more insight into how the debates actually proceed. The themes developed in this volume will, however, enable readers to situate the later developments within a far longer time period (what the French call the *longue durée*).

I have drawn from and built on key arguments made in my own earlier publications for material to repurpose here, but no chapter in this volume (except for Chapter 5 on the politics of women’s history, which has been reworked and expanded) reprints the substance of an earlier published

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article. Wherever appropriate, I have acknowledged my borrowings in the bibliographical footnotes, on the presumption that I need no “permission” from other publishers to utilize my own work in a modified form. This book has no formal bibliography; however, the footnotes are both bibliographical and historiographical and both primary and secondary sources are cited in order of publication rather than alphabetically. I have tried to make the references as complete, explicit, and transparent as possible, so that others can easily access the evidence if they so desire and verify (or dispute) the conclusions I have reached. I have resisted the urge to quote from secondary sources, and have attempted to track down the original documents or their facsimiles.

This seemingly unending debate on the woman question is nothing less than a contest over the politics of knowledge, one in which the knowledge base has long been male-centered. Indeed, this book provides a case study in what we now call “the sexual politics of knowledge.” It takes some doing for women and their associates sympathetic to women’s rights to make a dent in, and eventually, to begin contributing to and finally, significantly inflecting, expanding, and “gendering” that knowledge base. As the narrative proceeds, I make a point of not anticipating what comes next but try to situate the action (and thus, the readers) in the moment; this is accomplished by paying careful attention to verb tenses, and in some cases the use of the future conditional. Generally speaking, I prefer to let theoretical insights proceed from the abundant evidence that I have unearthed (there is still much more evidence awaiting discovery), rather than imposing one or another theoretical “lens” on the reading of that evidence. Finally, all translations from the French are mine, unless otherwise attributed in the notes.



## *Acknowledgments*

This book, like my earlier publication *European Feminisms* and the volume that will complement this one, is a synthetic work of interpretative history grounded in primary sources. Such work is possible only by building on the earlier contributions and insights of my many colleagues in French and European history, literature, art, and culture, by revisiting their sources and supplementing them with my own discoveries, and by weaving the whole into a fresh fabric. Rather than thanking them here individually (you know who you are) for their contributions and insights, or relegating such recognition to the chapter footnotes (as one manuscript reviewer suggested), I have chosen to acknowledge their work (and that of other “authorities”) in the body of the text. This strategy indicates not only that I have read their books and articles but also that I have taken into account their findings and observations. By thus acknowledging the scholars whose research and insights has contributed greatly to the foundation for my book, I also demonstrate what a major contribution their practice of women’s and gender history has made to reorienting the discipline of history more generally – and, in particular, to reconceptualizing French (and Franco-phone) history from a gendered perspective. No one should doubt that this book is grounded in decades of collaborative, collegial feminist scholarship.

I have not neglected “quarrels” or disagreements with other historians in the text. I prefer to think of such disagreements as legitimate debates about interpretation. It is, of course, also possible to relegate these to the footnotes, but I think that engaging readers in the ongoing conversations about interpretations of evidence remains a critical component of the best practice of historical writing, and that highlighting the occasions where historians differ should not be avoided.

I do want to acknowledge the financial support for this project, through research fellowships and awards from the National Endowment for the

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Humanities, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, as well as the moral support provided by my decades-long affiliation with the Michelle R. Clayman Institute for Gender Research (established as the Institute for Research on Women) at Stanford University. Moreover, without the most helpful librarians and curators at Stanford's Green Library and Hoover Library (as well as a sprinkling of smaller campus libraries, including the medical school library), and the directors and staff of numerous libraries and archives in France, Belgium, and Switzerland, I could not have located and consulted so many primary sources over the years. Thank you so much for your help!

I am deeply grateful to both the anonymous readers (for the press) for the detailed attention they have given to my chapters. These heroic colleagues went over my manuscript in detail. Their suggestions for improving the final version are deeply appreciated. The extended attention and care of these colleagues (and other friends and associates over the years) is a priceless gift. I would especially like to thank the staff at Cambridge University Press, beginning with Lewis Bateman, who initially took on my book(s) before his retirement in May 2016 and who selected the two anonymous readers. I also thank Michael Watson at Cambridge University Press's UK office for shepherding both books through the publication process. Thanks go to the production crew, beginning with Robert Judkins at Cambridge University Press, to Divya Arjunan of SPI Global, and to Julia Ter Maat in Singapore for her careful copyediting. I also appreciate the great care with which Robert Swanson at Arc Indexing, Inc., prepared the index for this volume.

## *Reconnaissance*

*Voices from the French Debates on the Woman Question, 1400–1870*

Just the sight of this book [by Matheolus] . . . made me wonder how it happened that so many different men – and learned men among them – have been and are so inclined to express both in speaking and in their treatises and writings so many wicked insults about women and their behavior.

**Christine de Pizan**

*Le Livre de la Cité des dames / The Book of the City of Ladies* (1405)

\* \* \*

If we had permitted our women to make the laws and to write History, what tragic and hideous narratives women would have been able to write about the unmentionable wickedness of their unworthy males.

**Henri Corneille Agrippa de Nettesheim**

*Sur la noblesse et l'excellence du sexe féminin . . .* (1529, 1537)

\* \* \*

To promote a woman to bear rule, superiority, dominion, or empire above any realm, nation, or city, is repugnant to nature; contumely [*an insult*] to God, a thing most contrary to his revealed will and approved ordinance; and finally, it is the subversion of good order, of all equity and justice.

**John Knox**

*The First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women* (1558)

\* \* \*

Happy you are, Reader, if you do not belong to this sex, which has been deprived of liberty and kept from all benefits; which has also

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been excluded from all virtues and barred from obligations, offices, and public functions: in a word, deprived of power.

**Marie LeJars de Gournay**  
*Grief des dames* (1626)

\* \* \*

If I wore chains that could be broken, they would have been broken long ago. . . . Under what conditions can liberty be found? From birth we are not only the slaves of our parents but of custom and fashion. . . . We are not given even the freedom to choose our masters, since we are often married against our inclination . . . Ambition is useless to us and our heritage is obedience.

**Madeleine de Scudéry**  
*Clélie, Histoire Romaine*, Book II (1660)

\* \* \*

In all that which is taught to Women, do we see any thing that tends to solid instruction? It seems on the contrary, that men have agreed on this sort of education, on purpose to abase their courage, darken their mind, and to fill it only with vanity, and fopperies; there to stifle all the seeds of Vertue, and Knowledge, to render useless all the dispositions which they might have to great things, and to take from them the desire of perfecting themselves, as well as we by depriving them of the means.

**François Poullain de la Barre**  
*De l'Égalité des deux sexes* (1673)

\* \* \*

[W]oman was specifically made to please man. If man ought to please her in turn, the necessity is less direct. His merit lies in his power; he pleases simply because he is strong. I grant you this is not the law of love; but it is the law of nature, which is older than love itself. . . . The whole education of women ought to be relative to men.

**Jean-Jacques Rousseau**  
*Émile, ou De l'éducation* (1762)

\* \* \*

The representatives should have absolutely the same interests as those represented; therefore women should only be represented by

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women. . . . Why is it that the law is not the same for both? Why does one sex have everything and the other nothing?

**Madame B\*\*\* B\*\*\***

*Cahier des Doléances et Réclamations de Femmes* (1789)

\* \* \*

Either no individual of the human race has genuine rights, or else all have the same; and he who votes against the right of another, whatever the religion, the colour, or sex of that other, has henceforth abjured his own.

**Marie-Jean-Antoine-Nicolas de Caritat, marquis de Condorcet**

*Sur l'Admission des femmes au droit de cité* (1790)

\* \* \*

Man, are you capable of being just? It is a woman who asks you this question; at least you will not deny her this right. Tell me! Who has given you the sovereign authority to oppress my sex?

**Olympe de Gouges**

*Les Droits de la femme* (1791)

\* \* \*

*Citoyennes*, it is as Christians and mothers that women must demand the rank that belongs to them in the church, the state, and the family. . . . It is especially this sacred function as mother, which some insist is incompatible with the exercise of a citizen's rights, that imposes on woman the duty of watching over the future of her children and confers on her the right to intervene in all the activities not only of civil life but of political life as well.

**Jeanne Deroin**

*"Mission de la femme"* (1849)

\* \* \*

The eighteenth century proclaimed the rights of man, the nineteenth will proclaim the right of woman.

**Victor Hugo**

"Sur la Tombe de Louise Jullien" (1853)

\* \* \*

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Through labor, also, does woman claim to conquer her civil rights. . . . To exclude woman from active occupations in order to confine her to the cares of the household is to attempt an impossibility, to close the way to progress, and to replace woman beneath the yoke of man . . . it is in human nature to rule and domineer over those whom we provide with their daily bread.

**Jenny P. d'Héricourt**

*La Femme affranchie* (1860) / *A Woman's Philosophy of Woman, or Woman Affranchised* (1864)

\* \* \*

Equal to man before God, before the law woman is in a state of dependence from which she alone can extricate herself.

**Eugénie Niboyet**

*Le vrai livre des femmes* (1863)

\* \* \*

[T]he present state of our society demonstrates that under the misleading names of liberty and equality woman is held back in deplorable inferiority and excluded from employments that were formerly guaranteed her by both legislation and custom.

**Julie-Victoire Daubié**

*La Femme pauvre au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle* (1866)

\* \* \*

After having reflected a great deal on the destiny of women in all times and in every nation, I have come to the conclusion that every man ought to say to every woman, instead of *bonjour—Pardon!* for the strongest have made the laws.

**Alfred de Vigny**

*Journal d'une poète* 1867 (quote from 1844)

\* \* \*

Women's inferiority is not a natural fact, we repeat, it is a human invention, a social fiction.

**Maria Deraismes**

"*La Femme et le droit*" (1868)

\* \* \*

Woman is neither a slave nor a queen nor an idol. She is a human being like yourselves; like you, she has a right to autonomy. . . . By denying woman the right to work, you degrade her; you put her under man's yoke and deliver her over to man's good pleasure. By ceasing to make her a worker, you deprive her of her liberty and, thereby, of her responsibility . . . , so that she will no longer be a free and intelligent creature, but merely a reflection, a small part of her husband. . . . It is work alone that makes independence possible and without which there is no dignity.

**Paule Mink**

*"Le Travail des femmes"* (1868)

\* \* \*

One thing we may be certain of—that what is contrary to women's nature to do, they never will be made to do by simply giving their nature free play. The anxiety of mankind to interfere in behalf of nature, for fear lest nature should not succeed in effecting its purpose, is an altogether unnecessary solicitude. What women by nature cannot do, it is quite superfluous to forbid them from doing. . . . I should like to hear somebody openly enunciating the doctrine . . . "It is necessary to society that women should marry and produce children. They will not do so unless they are compelled. Therefore it is necessary to compel them." The merits of the case would then be clearly defined.

**John Stuart Mill**

*On the Subjection of Women / L'Assujettissement des Femmes* (1869)

\* \* \*