

A Might-Have- Been: Feminism in Eighteenth-Century France

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ABSTRACT

In this article, the author presents an analysis of early eighteenth-century attitudes to women and their education in France, as well as those prevalent later in the century, with particular reference to Mme de Lambert and Rousseau.

RÉSUMÉ

Dans l'article qui suit, l'auteure présente une analyse, d'une part, des attitudes en France au début du 18^e siècle à l'égard des femmes et de leur éducation et, d'autre part, des attitudes prédominantes plus tard dans le siècle. Elle fait référence notamment à Mme de Lambert et à Rousseau.

Amidst the complex tapestry of ideas in eighteenth-century France, the pale strand of what might be termed fledgling feminism can be discerned. It was not a matter of human rights, still less of economic equality between the sexes, nor a movement with any sort of coherence, but rather a re-evaluation, by individuals, of the conventions which had historically shaped and governed the lives of women in the leisured classes. These attitudes, determined by sex, class and religion, reinforced by the post Renaissance male supremacy in the economic and legal domains, and woven into the cultural values and behavioral patterns of society, had formed a severely restricted view of what activities and faculties were considered proper for women. As thinking or opposing established values were themselves considered unsuitable or impossible for the female sex, the conventions had made of women unwitting collaborators in their own lack of freedom of choice.

Yet women had never been absent from the cultural and artistic life of the preceding centuries.¹ The lives and works of individual women had always presented the possibility of a different vision. Male writers had also occasionally implied the possibility of a less passive role for girls. In the seventeenth century,

Molière, for example, had suggested that they be allowed to marry for love and not be disposed of at the whim of unreasonable fathers. Yet there we also see the limits and the ambivalence which characterised the debate then and later about women's destiny, for Molière making fun of the exaggerations of "les femmes savantes" and "les précieuses ridicules" was often interpreted as mocking the learned woman herself.

Ambivalence was indeed to persist into the eighteenth century when women became the focus of one of the great debates of the day. Ambivalence marked the attitudes of most of the great thinkers and writers of the period.² Diderot, Voltaire, Montesquieu, though sympathetic to women as examples of political oppression, seemed on the whole fearful of the results to social order were women as a social group free to think for themselves and to achieve greater influence in society. They did not offer any clear answer to the questions they posed about whether "il est plus avantageux d'oter aux femmes leur liberté que de la leur laisser" and whether "la loi naturelle soumet les femmes aux hommes."³ The novelists, too, raised questions with ambiguous answers about women's capacity to exercise freedom of choice. Most

eighteenth-century novels where the heroine challenges established authority end in the ruin of both.⁴ Ambivalence of attitude fractures the debate about women and deprives it of common directions. On only one point do all agree, and that is on the necessity for reform of women's education.

The reform was seen as a practical necessity, in order to ensure a suitable mate for the new model citizen of the philosophe's ideals. The problem was seen as a moral one, its objective being to ensure that women be virtuous — and, if possible, happily virtuous — in their pre-destined role. If the scope of the common debate was thus limited, its very existence nevertheless gave the opportunity for expressing more radical and far-reaching ideas, and it did, indeed, give rise to some expressions of a more overt, unambiguous feminism.

It is found in the works of eminent men throughout the century, from Marivaux to Clemenceau, where it is one theme among others in their life-work. It is also found in the writings of women who became writers, often almost in spite of themselves, because of its importance for them. From one end of the century to the other, we find women writing treatises about women and their education. Encouraged by the work of Mme de Maintenon⁵ and the criticisms of women's education of Fleury⁶ and Fénelon,⁷ they would transcend the roles of wife, hostess and companion of famous men, writing at considerable personal cost, but with the intense conviction and psychological insight of experience. Mme de Lambert, Mme d'Epinau, Mme de Graffigny, Mme de Chatelet, and Mme de Genlis differ in milieu and character, but they have in common a determination to attempt to make women participants in the mainstream of the eighteenth-century movement of social reform. Of these women, Mme de Lambert, in her "Avis à sa fille" and "Essai sur les Femmes,"⁸ is a typical and the earliest eighteenth-century example.

Their opposition was the entrenched inherited attitudes to women, difficult to counter because largely unconscious, and the subtle, liberal ambivalence — even more difficult to combat — of otherwise enlightened men of great intellectual ability and fame. If one single person in the eighteenth century embodied all the forces ranged against the feminists, it was Rousseau. He would endow the conservative position with all the lustre of his erratic genius, so that his conventional, stereotyped creation, Sophie, would be

seen as a new ideal of womanhood. He would, almost single-handedly, in the combined effect of his *Nouvelle Héloïse*⁹ and *Émile*,¹⁰ strike the fatal blow to the feminist thrust of the eighteenth century.¹¹

Mme de Lambert and Rousseau can thus be seen as representing the extremes of the eighteenth-century debate about women's education and their role in society. Although their views are familiar to specialists of the period and to students of the history of feminism, there is a certain fascination and value in setting out, side by side, their opinions on selected common themes. We see how from a common aim and starting point, they arrive at a very different vision.

Both Mme de Lambert and Rousseau were inspired by "un rêve de perfection et de bonheur par cette perfection,"¹² but their view of this perfection diverges right from the start. Their differences stem from their attitude to women's desire to please. It is, according to the novelists of the period, and indeed to Mme de Lambert herself, axiomatic in the eighteenth century that women are born with an inordinate need to please. In conventional thought, this instinct gives women their power and is seen as Nature's way of compensating women for their innate weakness of body and intellect. The opposition of biological strength and weakness implicit in this view defines human relations as competitive and aggressive. Women must compete with other women for men's attention, for prestige and for social success through marriage. If the good match usually depends on factors beyond their control — the rank and fortune of their father — love is the ultimate trophy in a stylised combat where man, though "vanquished" temporarily by a woman's charms, keeps his power and dominant status intact. This view of human relations is endorsed by Rousseau. Women are born, he says, "pour plaire et pour être subjuguée" (p. 446). Nature intended it this way. Learning to please and to accept subjugation are thus the fundamental aims of women's education:

Toute l'éducation des femmes doit être relative aux hommes. Leur plaire, leur être utiles, se faire aimer et honorer d'eux, les élever jeunes, les soigner grands, les conseiller, les consoler, leur rendre la vie agréable et douce: voilà les devoirs des femmes dans tous les temps, et ce qu'on doit leur apprendre dès leur enfance. (p. 455)

Thirty years earlier, however, Mme de Lambert had denounced this view. Criticising the conventional education of girls in her day, she says:

Rien n'est ... si mal entendu que l'éducation qu'on donne aux jeunes personnes. On les destine à plaire: on ne leur donne des leçons que pour les agréments; on fortifie leur amour-propre; on les livre à la mollesse, au monde et aux fausses opinions; on ne leur donne jamais de leçons de vertu ni de force. Il y a une injustice, ou plutôt une folie, à croire qu'une pareille éducation ne tourne pas contre elles. (p. 48)

Mme de Lambert believes that the desire to please is a weakness to be overcome. For her, the adult mature woman is charming but has no need of the approval of others, for she is not defined by her capacity to please. Self-possessed, self-reliant, she knows and respects herself. "La plus grande science," she says, "est de savoir être à soi" (p. 74). Women's education is thus a matter of developing a sense of personal worth which rests on authentic inner resources. It is these that make women both attractive to others and secure in their self-esteem. She therefore urges her daughter to work on her character and to develop her potential qualities, answering only to God. "Pensez que vous avez un esprit à cultiver et à nourrir de la vérité, un coeur à épurer et à conduire, et un culte de religion à rendre" (p. 67).

This difference in the attitudes toward women's instinct to please colours and determines the attitudes of Mme de Lambert and Rousseau in all aspects of women's education. It dictates their educational methodology and the subject matter they deem suitable for the formative years of girls.

Mme de Lambert is aware that her values and methods are unusual in her day. She launches a defiant attack on society: "J'attaquerai les moeurs du temps, qui sont l'ouvrage des hommes" (p. 146). She explains to her daughter that it is necessary to take her out of the "éducation ordinaire" and to free her of the "préjugés de l'enfance" in order to fortify her mind (p. 84). For her, it is never too early to begin to "combattre les vices de l'esprit" and to "perfectionner le coeur et les sentiments" (p. 79). To this end, she outlines a program of study where the work is done by the student, and of which the student herself is the object, with the mother serving as guide and counsellor. Each convention concerning women is examined critically and nuances defined. For example, the little girl must learn

obedience to authority but not at the expense of her freedom of action and thought.

Il faut qu'une jeune personne ait de la docilité ... mais aussi ne faut-il pas pousser cette docilité trop loin... En donnant trop d'étendue à la docilité, vous prenez sur les droits de la raison, vous ne faites plus d'usage de vos propres lumières qui s'affaiblissent. C'est donner des bornes trop étroites à vos idées que de les renfermer dans celles d'autrui. (p. 71)

The implications of this advice are also examined, to establish a distinction between self-love or conceit and self-esteem — that knowledge of one's personal resources and worth which permits one to help others and find happiness in doing so. Mme de Lambert tells her daughter that "la vie civile est un commerce d'offices mutuels ... en songeant au bonheur des autres vous assurerez le vôtre" (pp. 84–85). Similar far-reaching distinctions are made in other details of the conventional girlhood. Little girls have the reputation of being chatterboxes, for example. Mme de Lambert says, "Le silence convient toujours à une jeune personne: il y a de la modestie et de la dignité à la garder... Mais comme on ne peut pas toujours se taire, il faut savoir que la première règle pour bien parler, c'est de bien penser" (p. 94).

In brief, she constantly affirms the necessity for her daughter to weigh the proprieties critically and to see beyond them to an ideal of social concern. Rousseau, however, would mock such precepts for their didactic tone, and as ill-suited to the age of small girls. He says "on a tout fait maxime et précepte, et l'on a rendu fort ennuyeux aux jeunes personnes ce qui ne doit être pour elles qu'amusement et folâtres jeux" (p. 469). He extends to Sophie's education some of the concepts he expounded for Émile: Respect for the spontaneity of the child, and the need to make lessons interesting and well-adapted to the age of the child. He pleads for some freedom for little girls in childhood.

This apparent liberalism, however, is merely traditionalism disguised. Education is a process to which girls must submit, obedient to authority. Ignoring the parallel noted by the other "philosophes" between the conditions of women and political servitude, Rousseau maintains that girls must become accustomed to subjection. When he recommends that they be allowed a certain measure of freedom in their movements and a little fun in their lessons, it is

because happy children learn their feminine profession of pleasing more quickly that way. Their pleasures must be disciplined so that they learn to be happy despite the harsh realities of their lives as submissive beings. They should take a little exercise, just enough "pour faire tout ce qu'elles font avec grâce" (p. 457). They should be robust, so that "les hommes qui n'aitront d'elles le soient aussi" (p. 457) but without succumbing to the "indécente gymnastique" (p. 457) of the Greeks. They should go into society, but only enough to get a distaste for it before marriage, after which they must stay at home, "enfermées dans leurs maisons" (p. 457). They should be allowed to prattle, for "le talent de parler tient le premier rang dans l'art de plaire" (p. 470), but while still very young they must learn to "ne jamais rien dire que d'agréable à ceux à qui elles parlent" (p. 471). They should be allowed to play, but should be interrupted in the middle of their games, and "génées de bonne heure" (p. 461) so that they learn to respond with docility to the demands of others (p. 463) because their lives, though "moins laborieuse" than those of men, "étant ou devant être plus ... entrecoupée de soins divers, ne leur permet de se livrer par choix à aucun talent au préjudice de leurs devoirs" (p. 460). He maintains it is not difficult for them to learn to deny their talents or to work with constant interruptions: "la seule habitude suffit ... parce qu'elle ne fait que seconder la nature" (p. 463). And he, Rousseau, is not being unjust, but merely realistic: "Ce malheur, si c'en est un pour elles, est inséparable de leur sexe" (p. 461). Submission can be made painless, if properly taught: "il faut les exercer d'abord à la contrainte, afin qu'elle ne leur coûte jamais rien, à dompter toutes leurs fantaisies, pour les soumettre aux volontés d'autrui" (p. 461).

Dutiful submission compared to critical thought: the two objectives determine Rousseau's and Mme de Lambert's attitudes to formal study. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, Fénelon had satirised the traditionalist attitude to women's learning: "il ne faut pas que les filles soient savantes, la curiosité les rend vaines et précieuses; il suffit qu'elles sachent gouverner un jour leurs ménages, et obéir à leurs maris sans raisonner."¹³ Half a century later, Rousseau repeats the recipe without satire. Women, he says, should limit their thought processes to being attentive to what people think of them, to recognising suitable conditioned responses to authority. The household needs only one intellect "pour philosopher" and the husband possesses it.

Here we see the enduring power of popular stereotyped convention and the continuing unwillingness to apply to the condition of women the insights that characterise the philosophers' appreciation of political tyranny. We can measure the magnitude of the task Mme de Lambert and her successors of the same persuasion had undertaken.

She wanted nothing less than full intellectual emancipation for women. In her conviction that the whole personality should be developed and her desire that women be freed of conventional taboos and reliance on men, she insisted on the importance of knowledge. Though she warns her daughter against "le bel esprit" and the temptation to "courir après des sciences vaines" (such as reading novels and poetry) (p. 70), she affirms that it is good that "les jeunes personnes s'occupent de sciences solides" (such as Classical history) (p. 68). In her essay, entitled "Sur les femmes," she pleads vigorously for the development of all forms of intelligence and perception, making distinctions that, in the twentieth century, would be described in research on the right and left hemispheres of the brain as common to both sexes. Not in a spirit of competitiveness with men, but with the idea that women should be equal partners in harmonious relationships, she carefully analyses and defends those qualities traditionally dismissed as "feminine": imagination, sensitivity, feeling, the intuitions of the heart. To the latter, she attaches great importance. She emphasises it in all aspects of women's education:

Vous ne pouvez avoir ni humanité ni générosité sans la sensibilité. Un seul sentiment, un seul mouvement du coeur, a plus de crédit sur l'âme que toutes les sentences des philosophes. La sensibilité secourt l'esprit et sert la vertu. (p. 155)

She affirms that Nature has provided this quality to govern behaviour: "La persuasion du coeur est au dessus de celle de l'esprit, puisque souvent notre conduite en dépend, c'est à notre imagination et à notre coeur que la nature a remis la conduite de nos actions et de ses mouvements" (p. 155). Moreover, in a passage admirable for its lucid and elegant style and the audacity of its ideas, she defends intuition as a faculty superior to reason, but affirms the desirability of cultivating both. She asks for respectful understanding so that women can write without ridicule and, in a surge of splendid indignation, protests against the sex-typing of intelligence and the masculine usurpation of intellect, exclaiming:

Quelle est la tyrannie des hommes! Ils veulent que nous ne fassions aucun usage de notre esprit ni de nos sentiments. Ne doit-il pas leur suffire de régler tout le mouvement de notre coeur, sans se saisir encore de notre intelligence? Ils veulent que la bienséance soit aussi blessée quand nous orons notre esprit que quand nous livrons notre coeur. C'est étendre trop loin leurs droits. (p. 149)

The difference between Rousseau and Mme de Lambert in the quality of the analysis and in the stature of their vision of the finished product is nowhere more apparent than in their discussion of the values to be developed in the virtuous, happy woman. Both focus their analyses on religion and love.

For Mme de Lambert, religion is an end in itself, the source of all inner strength, inspiring both virtue and happiness. "Il faut, ma fille," she says, "être persuadée que la perfection et le bonheur se tiennent: que vous ne serez heureuse que par la vertu" (p. 55). Virtue, which she defines as the sum total of plural virtues, is both the natural consequence of a well-developed spiritual life and the source of happiness. "Quand la religion sera gravée dans notre coeur, alors toutes les vertus couleront de cette source: tous les devoirs se rangeront chacun dans leur ordre" (p. 48). It is in religion that women find the serenity that permits them to live at ease in society and with themselves: "en vous unissant avec Dieu, elle vous réconcilie avec le monde et avec vous-même" (p. 50). She recommends meditation in solitude, away from worldly preoccupations, for the pursuit of self-knowledge and inner peace. "Il faut pour être heureuse, penser sainement," she explains. "Il faut vous ménager des ressources contre les chagrins de la vie... Assurez-vous une retraite, un asile en vous-même... (p. 74). Il faut donc de temps en temps se retirer du monde, se mettre à part ... pour lire et pour faire usage de vos réflexions ... la solitude aussi assure la tranquillité et est amie de la sagesse: c'est au dedans de nous qu'habitent la paix et la vérité" (p. 75). Summarising, she says, "Le bonheur est dans la paix de l'âme" (p. 75) and "Croyez que le sage ne court pas après la félicité, mais qu'il se la donne" (p. 77).

For Rousseau, religion is a mere means to an end, and the debate is at once narrowed in scope and trivialized. He sees it as a source of useful lessons in obedience and conformity. Women need a simplified and authoritarian religion, he affirms, to resign them to their lot and to keep them faithful to their husbands.

This fidelity is virtue. Religion should make women want to please their husbands. Pleasing their husbands is happiness. He criticises conventional religious instruction as too austere, interfering with the desire to please. It is thus one of the causes of the polarisation of virtue and happiness and so must be presented in an attractive form. Instructors should avoid censuring such sources of joy as music and dancing (p. 468). These, properly channelled, can be a pleasure for a husband (p. 469). Girls made unhappy by a too severe religious instruction will become disagreeable wives, "maussades, grondeuses, insupportables dans leurs maisons" (p. 468). They will drive their husbands to "libertinage." "Le christianisme," says Rousseau, "a tant fait pour empêcher les femmes d'être aimables, qu'on a rendu les maris indifférents" (p. 468). Religion must be dosed with care to ensure the smiling virtue (fidelity) of women because the virtue and happiness of their husbands depend on it (p. 468).

As for love, it is, for Mme de Lambert, an extension of the childhood lessons in self-respect and social behaviour. As the ultimate object of women's education, it has to be learned gradually. Deviating markedly from the conventional view of women's behaviour, she sees the possibility of forming harmonious social relations where kindness, intelligent insight and self-respect prevent the inevitability of rivalry and hostile confrontations. She offers maxims, the tone of which reminds us of the great moralists of the seventeenth century, for devising behaviour without aggressivity. Designed for individual women, they are equally valid for men, and for the relationships between nations. To disarm one's aggressors, she proposes a "humble aveu de nos fautes" which "désarme la haine et émousse la colière" (p. 83). It is a lesson echoed by her contemporary and friend, Marivaux, in *La vie de Marianne*.¹⁴ She proposes a non-competitive model based on her leitmotiv of "Songez à vous estimer à bon titre" (p. 91), explaining that "Nous croyons nous élever en abaissant nos semblables, c'est ce qui nous rend médisants et envieux. La bonté rend bien plus que la malignité" (p. 85).

"La bonté" and "le respect" are, in her view, the key virtues of social relations and vital to the supreme human relationship, love between men and women. Like the majority of eighteenth-century thinkers, she considers sexual passion a disaster leading to personal and social disorder. Love, to be "reasonable" and durable, must be tempered with common sense,

discipline and restraint. She criticises the contemporary "permissiveness" as frivolous and shallow and, because it leads to unhappiness, "La plupart des femmes prennent l'amour comme un amusement" (p. 173) and "la plupart des hommes n'aiment que d'une manière vulgaire, ils n'ont qu'un objet" (p. 169). She compares this to the attitude of "Les anciens" who "ne croyaient pas que le plaisir dût être le premier objet de l'amour. Ils étaient persuadés que la vertu doit en être le soutien. Nous en avons banni les mœurs et la probité, et c'est la source de tous les malheurs" (p. 163). She recommends modesty in women, both because modesty retains its charm longer than beauty and because it is non-aggressive (p. 148). It must, however, be genuine, not just be adopted as a compensatory weapon when beauty fades. When sincere, it can add to the pleasure of love-making, she hints elegantly, as "l'aiguillon des désirs," without which, "l'amour serait sans gloire et sans goût.... La pudeur, enfin, est si nécessaire aux plaisirs qu'il faut la conserver, même dans les temps destinés à le perdre" (p. 148).

Love is a subject which takes some of the earnestness out of Mme de Lambert's style. She talks lyrically of an ideal engaging and refining heart, mind, imagination and feeling: "L'amour perfectionne les âmes bien nées" (p. 161), "l'amour est à l'âme ce que la lumière est aux yeux: il écarte les peines comme la lumière écarte les ténèbres" (p. 173). It inspires some of her most radical passages where she attempts, like Marivaux, to elaborate a "métaphysique de l'amour" (p. 176), pleading for the foundation of a school "pour cultiver le coeur." Love, she argues, is too important to leave to chance.

[C'est] le premier plaisir, la plus douce et la plus flatteuse de toutes les illusions. Puisque ce sentiment est si nécessaire au bonheur des humains, il ne le faut pas bannir de la société: il faut seulement apprendre à le conduire et à le perfectionner. Il y a tant d'écoles établies pour cultiver l'esprit: pourquoi n'en pas avoir pour cultiver le coeur? (p. 162)

Love also inspires some of her most spirited feminist challenges: "si vous voulez trouver une imagination ardente, une âme profondément occupée, un coeur sensible et bien touché, cherchez-le chez les femmes d'un caractère raisonnable" (p. 167). For Mme de Lambert, as for Marivaux and Mme d'Epainay, the mature woman is capable of being a complete, loving person, able to enter into a relationship of equals.

Rousseau, on the other hand, has ambivalent attitudes toward women and love. Although, in *La nouvelle Héloïse*, he paints one of the greatest portraits of love in eighteenth-century literature, he illustrates there the tragic results of passion where marriage is socially impossible. In *Émile*, he attempts to prescribe for a moderate, reasonable love within the conventions and the context of a suitable match. However, his prescription of a sexual and sentimental education for Sophie necessitates some strange contortions of logic, as he tries to reconcile the traditional initial premise that women are born to be submissive dependents, with his thesis that they can be transformed into virtuous, responsible partners for the citizen of the ideal State. Believing that women are formed by Nature for love and that all Nature creates is good, but sharing with medieval theologians a notion which persisted in eighteenth-century popular consciousness that sexual moderation is alien to women, he sees women's virtue as being in conflict with their nature. They must therefore be prevented from exercising their natural instinct freely. The solution he proposes is to direct women's need to love towards motherhood, and their lust towards a husband in a marriage for love. It was hardly a radical solution even in its day, the love match being already socially acceptable. Mme de Lambert's son had indeed made such a marriage. The love he prescribes for Sophie is once again a trivialization. It is a stereotyped sexual combat in an age-old tradition. His men and women are basically opponents, two powers attempting to conquer the other. He talks of "l'attaque et la défense," opposing "l'audace d'un sexe et la timidité de l'autre," where "sa violence à elle est dans ses charmes: c'est par eux qu'elle doit ... contraindre "[l'homme] à trouver sa force et à en user." Women exploit "la modestie et la honte dont la nature arma le faible pour asservir le fort," so that "l'un triomphe de la victoire que l'autre lui fait remporter" (pp. 446-7).

Many other eighteenth-century novelists, from Prévot to Laclos, analyse in similar terms this competitive, coy view of love but deplore it. Rousseau, on the other hand, states that, since it is Nature's creation, women should learn to excel in it, using their "natural" weapons of coquetry and guile ("la ruse"). Contemporaries of Rousseau, notably Laclos in *Liaisons dangereuses*,¹⁵ identify these as among the worst faults of women, but Rousseau, "persuadé que tous les penchants naturels sont bons et droits par eux-mêmes," recommends that women cultivate them along

with their other "natural" talents while learning to draw the line: "il ne s'agit que d'en prévenir l'abus" (p. 464). He devotes many pages to attempting a distinction between good coquetry and bad. Ill-directed, he admits, this "natural" propensity leads to libertinage, but oriented towards a worthy object, an "homme de mérite ... vraiment aimable," it is a legitimate weapon in the arsenal of a woman who is "honnête, aimable et sage" (p. 497). As for "ruse," it is "un talent naturel au sexe" and which, judiciously used, ensures the equality of the sexes. Without it, woman would be man's slave.

Cette adresse particulière donnée au sexe est un dédommagement très équitable de la force qu'il a de moins: sans quoi la femme ne serait pas la compagne de l'homme, elle serait son esclave: c'est par cette supériorité de talent qu'elle se maintient son égale, et qu'elle gouverne en lui obéissant. (p. 465)

"Ruse" even contributes to the happiness of the whole family:

On ne sait pas combien cette adresse des femmes nous est utile à nous-mêmes, combien elle ajoute du charme à la société des deux sexes, combien elle sert à réprimer la pétulance des enfants, combien elle contient de maris brutaux, combien elle maintient de bons ménages, que la discorde troublerait sans cela. (p. 465)

Guile and coquetry, far from seen as vices by Rousseau, lead to honesty. They reconcile the twin opposed ideals of happiness and virtue in an honest woman: "Oui," he says, "je soutiens qu'en tenant la coquetterie dans ses limites, on la rend modeste et vraie, on en fait une loi d'honnêteté" (p. 487). Women are not born dishonest, he reasons. "Elles le deviennent" (p. 486). However, this observation of the strength of social conditioning is immediately modified by the conventional explanation that, if women have "les mêmes besoins que l'homme," an honest woman does not have "les mêmes droits de les témoigner." Again we slip into coyness with the rhetorical exclamation: "De quelle adresse n'a-t-elle pas besoin pour faire qu'on lui dérobe ce qu'elle brûle d'accorder!" (p. 486) Unlike the modesty recommended by Mme de Lambert for the pleasure and peace of the couple, that of Rousseau is a weapon for manipulating a husband. Émile's tutor advises Sophie to withhold her conjugal favours, saying: "Vous régnerez longtemps par l'amour si vous rendez vos faveurs rares et précieuses, si vous savez les faire valoir.... Faites-vous chérir par vos

faveurs, et respecter par vos refus" (p. 613). The "honest" woman of Rousseau, in fact, cannot be frank and sincere. She cannot express her emotions openly but must dissemble, manipulating her own feelings and those of her husband. Her happiness, her virtue and the pleasure of her husband which is their ultimate aim, are fundamentally flawed: they are a trick, an image.

For Rousseau, appearances are indeed as important as reality. Even in the intimacy of love, women must be mindful of the judgement of others: "il ne leur suffit pas d'être sages, il faut qu'elles soient reconnues comme telles ... ce que l'on pense d'elle ne lui importe pas moins que ce qu'elle est en effet" (p. 455). Rousseau's ideal woman must devote thought and incessant care to maintaining her reputation; it is her most precious possession. Her social relationships are dominated by the need to win and keep public approval. Her reputation is a sort of "alter ego" which is controlled and determined by others. It makes of her very identity a mask. Indeed it proves, for Sophie is unfaithful to Émile. One can only conclude that Rousseau himself did not believe in his own thesis of women's virtue.

Mme de Lambert had said of reputation: "Voulez-vous qu'on pense et qu'on dise du bien de vous? Ne dites jamais de mal de personne" (pp. 86-7). A woman's reputation is her own responsibility. "Il faut fonder votre réputation sur vos vertus, et non sur le démérite des autres" (p. 85), she tells her daughter, advising her to cultivate the reality and not worry about the public image. "La réputation est un bien très désirable," she says firmly, "mais c'est faiblesse de la rechercher avec trop d'ardeur et de ne rien faire que pour elle: il faut se contenter de la mériter" (p. 88).

Mme de Lambert's ideal is indeed that of a fully responsible person. It has the authority of long-pondered personal experience. Having been raised in the conventional limitations, she, a concerned mother, seeks for her daughter and others a new kind of education for a new kind of womanhood. She envisages a woman who is a citizen in her own right, independent-minded but kind, individual but loving, a partner but also serene in her own identity. Rousseau, on the other hand, is at his least original when discussing the education of women. His Sophie is a sop to the conventions of novel writing, a fictional heroine made up largely of theologians' prejudice and folklore stereotypes to illustrate a thesis about the education of

men. A cloistered child-wife, rendered virtuous by the bondage of rigorous taboos, she is a cardboard figure — intellectually, morally and emotionally dependent, her identity fused in that of her husband. Mme de Lambert's vision is born of a conviction that "les hommes, plutôt par la force que par le droit naturel, ont usurpé l'autorité sur les femmes" (p. 147), and that men's view of the relations between men and women — which Rousseau would endorse — is both too restrictive and too superficial. It is a recipe for social, personal and moral irresponsibility.

Yet, for many years, Rousseau was to have a more decisive influence than Mme de Lambert and her feminist successors. If we recognise her precepts as ideals for which to strive in our cultural values, many of Rousseau's attitudes are a familiar part of our own upbringing and our twentieth-century daily experience. Perpetuated in literature, the arts, and popular entertainment, these attitudes still influence the relations between men and women in all aspects of social experience, for they also influenced the historians and educators of the intervening nineteenth century who founded the pedagogical and behavioral ideas at the basis of institutionalised schooling. Although twentieth-century psychology has given new authority to some aspects of the theses put forward by Mme de Lambert and her successors, the importance of self-respect, human concern and multifaceted intelligence which she saw as the vital *sine que non* of women's education has yet to gain universal recognition in our co-ed classrooms. The eighteenth-century women feminists, when mentioned at all in histories of education, are cited, ironically, merely among Rousseau's precursors.

That their vision did not appeal to many male contemporaries nor to the male reformers of the nineteenth century is not surprising, but it is more difficult to account for the lack of popular support from the less articulate mass of women of the period and later. During the thirty years between Mme de Lambert's essays and Rousseau's *Émile*, there was no lack of role models for the women of the leisured classes and, indeed, there was an impressive number of able and brilliant women playing a significant role in the cultural life of France. Women were said to have "reigned" over society; their "salons" were frequented by the intellectual elite of their day. Many were more than notable hostesses: Mme d'Épinay wrote letters and novels about women's education, in critical response to

Rousseau,¹⁶ Mme de Genlis later published a treatise on women's education,¹⁷ Mme du Deffand corresponded with Walpole and Voltaire,¹⁸ Mme de Geoffrin offered advice to a king,¹⁹ Montesquieu mentions in *Lettres persanes* the role women played in financial and social circles in Paris.²⁰ Such women undoubtedly influenced each other and the great men of their acquaintance. Mme de Lambert, for example, was greatly admired by both Marivaux and Montesquieu. It is clear that if women as a group had no legal power, individual women of character had considerable influence. If the usual schooling of girls continued to consist of a few years in a convent with a minimal curriculum,²¹ there were notable exceptions. It was women who filled the classes on experimental physics and natural sciences;²² Mme de Chatelet became an eminent mathematician and translated Newton into French. Their example might be expected to form a rallying call to others less gifted. Their writings and their lives offered a potential for a new interpretation of values and behaviour, providing the potential foundations for a new, peculiarly feminine morality, a new vision of womanhood where women would be their own creation. Yet no mass movement developed in response to their appeals. They were perhaps too exceptional in their own day, too far removed from the lifestyle and preoccupations of most women to modify popular attitudes. They were perhaps too "grandes dames," too much a product of the values of their class and the "ancien régime" so that they were ultimately writing for and to each other. Or perhaps their lack of appeal to a wide readership has a simpler explanation: their topic — virtue — and, in the case of Mme de Lambert, the treatment of it, is perhaps intrinsically dull.

Rousseau, on the other hand, would write of sex and love, the great universals, and his values would be shared and understood by his readers among the rapidly expanding bourgeoisie. To the leisured women of the new majority, whose husbands shared the authoritarian and traditional attitudes Rousseau promoted, and who had no habit or hope of influence in society, he offered the bait of reigning in their households. The love he presents in *Émile*, calculated, tepid and submissive, is nevertheless illumined and dramatised by the intense anarchistic emotions of *La nouvelle Héloïse*. Put together, they offer the irresistible lure of Romantic love within the safety of marriage. In *Émile*, too, he offered women a new "raison d'être" and a new image of themselves in the form of nurturing motherhood. His vision required no great effort, no revolution of thought

or fundamental change in values; it posed no threat to men, Motherhood, fidelity in marriage, the love match, first a fashion, then the norm, a new unexamined convention, became a new shining ideal. The women who succumbed to its appeal failed to see that, in doing so, they were accepting an idealisation of authoritarianism, confirming deference to men as the ultimate female virtue and cloistering themselves in a restricted home lifestyle, shut off from the world. "Heureuses de se voir attribuer une fonction plus importante dans la famille," says Elisabeth Badinter in her remarkable study of Mme d'Epinau and Mme de Chatelet, "les femmes des classes favorisées adoptèrent sans réticence un système de valeurs encore plus contraignant que le précédent. Sans le savoir, elles mettaient fin à une période d'exceptionnelle liberté."²³

The challenge of Mme de Lambert and her feminist contemporaries and successors, however, is not merely addressed to women. If they lost a chance in the eighteenth century, so too did Western civilisation itself, for implicit in Mme de Lambert's thesis is a vision of human relations based on self-respect, leading to respect of others, and intelligent concern leading to harmonious relations in all sectors of society. The qualities admired by the friends and successors of Mme de Lambert are at the heart of the eighteenth-century feminist might-have-been. Making them an integral, functioning dynamic in our relations between individuals, couples, families, groups, races and nations, remains the great challenge of ours.

NOTES

1. See, notably, Régine Pernoud, *La femme au temps des cathédrales*, Editions Stock, 1980.
2. For elaboration of this point, see "Convent and Harem," *Atlantis*, Vol. 13, no. 1, and "Witch or Saint, Absolutes in the French 18th century Novel," *Atlantis*, Vol. 11, no. 1.
3. Montesquieu. *Lettres persanes*, Paris, Nelson Éditeurs, 1951, pp. 90-91.
4. For elaboration of this point, see "Convent and Harem," *Atlantis*, Vol. 13, no. 1, and for discussion of an exception, see "The Education of Marianne," *Atlantis*, Vol. 14, no. 1.
5. Mme de Maintenon. *Éducation et morale, Choix de lettres, entretiens et instructions*, par Félix Cadet et Eugène Darin, Paris: Delagrave; et *Lettres et entretiens sur l'Éducation des filles*, M.Th. Lavallée (ed.), Paris: Charpentier, 1861.
6. Fleury. Cité dans l'Introduction de l'édition de Paul Rousselot du *Traité de Fénelon*, op. cit. pp. v - ix.
7. Fénelon. *Traité de l'éducation des filles*, Paris: Librairie Delagrave, 1922, p. 1.
8. Mme de Lambert. *Oeuvres morales*, Paris: Librairie des Bibliophiles, MDCCCLXXXIII, *Avis à sa fille et Sur les*

Femmes. All quotations from this work are indicated by page number in the text.

9. Jean-Jacques Rousseau. *La nouvelle Héloïse*, Paris: Classiques Garnier.
10. For some analysis of *La nouvelle Héloïse*, see "Witch or Saint, Absolutes in the French 18th century Novel," *Atlantis*, Vol. 11, no. 1.
11. Jean-Jacques Rousseau. *Émile ou de l'éducation*, particularly Livre 5: "Sophie ou la femme," Paris: Classiques Garnier. All quotations from this work are indicated by page number in the text.
12. Mornet, Daniel. *Rousseau, l'homme et l'oeuvre*, Paris: Hatier Boivin, 1950.
13. Fénelon, op. cit.
14. Marivaux. *La vie de Marianne*, F. Deloffre (ed.), Paris: Garnier, 1963.
15. Lacos, Choderlos de. *Les liaisons dangereuses*, Édition Gallimard, 1952.
16. Mme d'Epinau. *Mémoires et Lettres*, translated as *Memoires et Correspondance* by E.G. Allingham. New York: Lincoln Mac Veagh, The Dial Press, MCMXXX; and Mme d'Epinau, *Les Conversations d'Émilie*, Paris: A. Eymery, Paris, 1822.
17. Mme de Genlis. *Discours sur la suppression des couvents et l'éducation publique des femmes*, 1790.
18. Mme du Deffand. *Madame la Marquise du Deffand: Lettres à Hugh Walpole, Voltaire et quelques autres*, Paris: Plasma, 1979.
19. Mouy, Charles de. *Correspondance du roi Paniatowski et de Madame Geoffrin*, Genève: Slatkine Reprints, 1970.
20. Montesquieu, op. cit.
21. Bowen, James. *A History of Western Education*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1975.
22. Mornet, op. cit.
23. Elisabeth Badinter. *Emilie, Emilie, l'ambition féminine au XVIII^e siècle*, Paris: Flammarion, 1983.

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