

Carley Aquin
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Dr. Kelly Summers
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**A Sphere of One's Own:
The Eighteenth-Century Shift from a One- to a Two-Sex Model of Sexual Difference**

Over the course of the eighteenth century, a schism in how sexual difference was construed resulted in the radical “reinterpretation of the female body in relation to the male.”¹ The one-sex inherited from the Greeks, which positioned women as man’s imperfect counterpart, was contested by the emergence of a two-sex model that categorized men and women in terms of biological incommensurability.² Previously, under the Galenic one-sex model, women’s physiology was believed to be the lesser version of men’s; women’s reproductive organs were viewed as the undescended and internalized variant.³ Although medical discoveries during the age of Enlightenment helped to advance this paradigm shift, beliefs about sexual differences were largely political and cultural constructions. Specifically, there was a “call to articulate sharp corporeal distinctions”⁴ between the sexes in order to justify the distribution of power in the public and private spheres.⁵ Nevertheless, Enlightenment debates over whether sexual difference was best understood as a matter of degree or kind continued into the French Revolution, with proponents of the former dominating the moderate stage, only to be violently excised from the public sphere during the radical Jacobin phase when Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s two-sex model gained ascendance.

¹ T. Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (London, 1990), p. 4.

² *Ibid.*, p. 6.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 193.

Despite the emergence of the two-sex model, one sex-thinking still lingered during the Enlightenment,⁶ resulting in dissension over sexual difference. In particular, the one-sex current of thinking was evident in writing produced by mainstream Enlightenment philosophes. For instance, in Denis Diderot's *D'Alembert's Dream*, the character Dr. Bordeu insists that men and women have the same anatomical parts, but that the latter possessed an imperfect version of the former.⁷ In contrast, the influential doctor Pierre Roussel argued that "[t]he different functions of men and women in the important task of procreation alone suffice to remove any idea of similarity"⁸ between the sexes. Diderot argued that "the preservation of the species and ourselves should afford us pleasure;"⁹ the anxieties that emerged from the perceived decline in birth rates, attributed to priestly celibacy, served to further legitimize women's reproductive role and demarcate the boundaries of socially acceptable behaviour.¹⁰ Although disagreement over sexual difference furthered the anatomizing of women's physiology and their associated roles, most philosophes had not yet concluded that women need be excluded from the public sphere based on some purported relationship between physical difference and their moral character or prescribed social roles. Rather, women were still active, if limited participants in the Enlightenment public sphere; for example, some took up the role of salonnière – a female cultural broker and hostess of intellectual discussions at salons – since most philosophes had not yet imposed the two-sex spheres.¹¹

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ As quoted by Laqueur, *Making Sex*, 26.

⁸ Pierre Roussel, *Système physique et moral de la femme, ou tableau philosophique de la constitution, de l'état organique, de temperament, des moeurs* (Paris, 1775), 134, <https://archive.org/details/systeme-phsiquee00rous/page/134>.

⁹ Diderot, original text, year [see Lieselotte footnote]; as quoted by L. Steinbrugge, *The moral sex: Woman's nature in the French Enlightenment*, trans. Pamela Selwyn (New York, 1995), 28.

¹⁰ Lieselotte Steinbrugge, *The moral sex: Woman's nature in the French Enlightenment*, trans. Pamela Selwyn (New York, 1995), 28.

¹¹ Dena Goodman, *The republic of letters: A cultural history of the French enlightenment* (Ithaca, 1996), p. 54.

Rousseau, however, diverged from most mainstream Enlightenment thinkers in his aversion to women's participation in the public sphere. In particular, he argued that public life posed a significant threat to both woman's virtue and man's morals.¹² He maintained that modern civilization, valuing luxury and refinement, was a corrupting force that effeminized men. However, Rousseau also attributed the debasement of their natural goodness, independence, and virility to the influence of public women, who he claimed diluted and corrupted intellectual discussions.¹³ Furthermore, Rousseau claimed that the linkage between women's vanity and the spectacularity of the public sphere resulted in the degradation of women's natural goodness.¹⁴ Specifically, he likened salonnieres to political prostitutes.¹⁵ To rectify this issue, he proposed that women be restricted to the private sphere and assume a domesticated role, since "there are no good morals for women outside of a withdrawn and domestic life."¹⁶ Alternatively, in his pedagogical treatise *Emile*, Rousseau offers his ideal version of a woman, Sophie, whose education was designed to reflect her naturally feminine moral and emotional nature. The neo-classical artist Jacques-Louis David illustrated Rousseau's vision of separate spheres in his painting *Oath of the Horatii*,¹⁷ which visualized gender difference as a republican political allegory. The painting illustrated Rousseau's ideal: valiant men performing civic virtue (the self-sacrificing crux of any republic) in public, whereas women demonstrated their domestic virtue in

¹² Rousseau, original text, year [see Landes footnote]; as quoted by J. Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere: In the Age of the Revolution* (Ithaca, 1988), 72.

¹³ Rousseau, original text, year [see Landes footnote]; as quoted by J. Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere: In the Age of the Revolution* (Ithaca, 1988), 88-89.

¹⁴ Rousseau, original text, year [see Landes footnote]; as quoted by J. Landes, "Women and the public Sphere: A modern perspective." *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Social and Cultural Practice*, no. 15 (August 1984): 30. <https://library.macewan.ca/full-record/edsjsr/edsjsr.23169275>

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Rousseau, original text, year [see Landes footnote]; as quoted by J. Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere: In the Age of the Revolution* (Ithaca, 1988), 72.

¹⁷ J.L. David. "The Oath of the Horatii," *The Guardian*. October 29, 2010. <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/jonathanjonesblog/2010/oct/29/french-revolution-art-strikes-sarkozy>

private. While the brothers prioritized public, over individual interests, in their vows to fight for the polity, women tended to the families and were portrayed as being overcome by emotion and familial concern.¹⁸ Although juxtaposition characterizes the painting, unity connects the separate spheres,¹⁹ through the emphasis that “family life [was] the ground of the state.”²⁰ Further, David’s *Oath of the Horatii* underscores the sort of socially prescribed roles that Rousseau endorsed in that political commitment is a duty reserved solely for men. While David painted the men as active citizens, the women depicted were passive to the point of lacking vision, underscoring that “natural” sentiments form their knowledge as opposed to reason or rational capabilities.²¹ Therefore, Rousseau’s view, as illustrated by *The Oath of the Horatii*, significantly contributed to the construction of sex-specific characteristics to describe women, which later became a natural fact during the radical phase of the revolution.²²



¹⁸ M. Gutwirth, *Corneille’s Horace and David’s Oath of the Horatii: A chapter in the Politics of Gender in Art*. (New York, 2011), 79.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ J. Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca, 1988), 157.

²¹ Ibid., p.153.

²² L. Steinbrugge, *The Moral Sex: Women’s Nature in the French Enlightenment*, trans. Pamela Selwyn (New York, 1995), 7.

FIGURE 1: Jacques-Louis David, *The Oath of the Horatii*, oil on canvas, 3.3 x 4.25m, commissioned by Louis XVI, painted in Rome, exhibited at the salon of 1785 (Musée du Louvre).

Although proponents of the one-sex model dominated the moderate phase of the French Revolution, few philosophes or politicians advocated for women's increased role in the public sphere. One particular exception was the Marquis de Condorcet, who wrote *On the Admission of Women to the Rights of Citizenship* to challenge underlying assumptions outlined in the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen (DRMC; 1789)*. Specifically, he claimed that if the rights are universal like the *DRMC* suggests, then suffrage should be extended to women as well as other marginalized groups.²³ He argued that women were sentient beings, “capable of acquiring moral ideas and reasoning about [those] ideas;”²⁴ thus, the logic of rights should extend to them. Although Condorcet recognized that men and women were dissimilar, he attributes sexual differentials in intellect and moral sensibilities to a difference in education and social conditions.²⁵ In agreement with the one-sex view, Condorcet believed that sexual difference existed on a continuum; however, his belief that the observed variation in rational capability between the sexes could be overcome did not elicit the revolution necessary for women to gain suffrage.

Although many contemporaries perceived gender difference as a spectrum during the moderate stage of the revolution, even radical proto-feminists “spoke in the language of the two sexes.”²⁶ In particular, Olympe de Gouges wrote *The Declaration for the Rights of Women on*

²³ L. Hunt. *The French Revolution and Human Rights: A Brief History with Documents*. (Boston, 2016), 109.

²⁴ M. Condorcet. “On the Admission of Women to the Rights of Citizenship” in *The French Revolution and Human Rights: A Brief History with Documents*, 2nd Edition, edited by Lynn Hunt (Boston, 2016), 110.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p110-11.

²⁶ Laqueur, *Making Sex*, p.194.

behalf of “the sex that is superior in beauty as in courage needed in maternal sufferings.”²⁷ The pamphlet served to rebuke the traditional treatment of women and to argue for equal rights, since “social distinctions may be based only on common utility.”²⁸ Furthermore, she claimed that suffrage is an imprescriptible right. Although she revered Rousseau’s social contract, she proposed that all citizens, regardless of sex or race for that matter, need contribute to the general will should it be truly general. Through the use of Rousseauian concepts, she justified abolishing the gendered concept of citizens and argued for a decidedly un-Rousseauian, inclusive political system.

Although not as candid about her political participation, Madame Roland also invoked Rousseauian ideas selectively and in a way that subverted his sexual politics. She was a member of the Girondins – a moderate republican faction during the French Revolution²⁹ – and was suspected of helping her husband run the Ministry of the Interior from behind the scenes.³⁰ Madame Roland hosted a political salon; however, despite her involvement with politics, she subscribed to the sorts of republican ideals of womanhood immortalized in David’s painting, perhaps due to the well-documented fact that “patriarchal ideologies and realities have assured women that there is safety in protected subordination and danger in vulnerable freedom.”³¹ Despite Madame Roland’s endorsement of Rousseauian ideals, as the result of her political participation, she was later accused of overstepping the “boundaries of female virtue.”³²

²⁷ Olympe de Gouges, “The Declaration of the Rights of Women” in *The French Revolution and Human Rights: A Brief History with Documents*, 2nd Edition, edited by Lynn Hunt (Boston, 2016), 116.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ T. Ashworth. *Life of Madame Roland* (London, 1911), p. xii, [https:// library.macewan.ca/full-record/cat00565a/4722377](https://library.macewan.ca/full-record/cat00565a/4722377)

³⁰ Ibid., p.251.

³¹ J. Bennett, *History Matters: Patriarchy and the Challenge of Feminism* (Philadelphia, 2006), 59.

³² P. Hyland, O. Gomez, and F. Greensides, *The Enlightenment: A sourcebook and reader* (Routledge, 2003), 369.

As Thomas Laqueur notes, since “[t]he universalistic claims made for human liberty and equality during the Enlightenment did not inherently exclude the female half of humanity, nature had to be searched if men were to justify their dominance of the public sphere.”³³ The contestation between sexes resulted in the “revolutionary creation of political culture, which served to validate the political participation of men and culpabilize that of women.”³⁴ Despite using Rousseauian language to describe the female sex, advocates for women’s political participation, specifically those who viewed sex in terms of degree rather than kind, were violently excised during the radical stage of the revolution. In particular, Madame Roland followed shortly after Olympe de Gouges to the guillotine, both condemned as counterrevolutionary, “unnatural” women.³⁵ Women’s role in the public sphere enflamed Jacobin anxieties of public women, who used gendered discourse for the tactical purpose of blaming Girondins for the high food prices.³⁶ This discourse had its desired effect, as the radical Montagnards – a republican faction – were able to oust the Girondins on the grounds of antisocial conspiracy. During the Terror, the Committee on General Security agreed that for the sake of stability, women must be expelled from the public sphere. Specifically, Jean-Pierre-André Amar stated that if women were to meet in political associations, “they would be obliged to sacrifice the more important cares to which nature calls them.”³⁷ Furthermore, he asserted that “women are disposed by their nature to an over excitation which would be deadly in public affairs.”³⁸ The Rousseauian logic of separate spheres clearly animated the Jacobins’ exclusion of

³³ T. Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (London, 1990), p. 194.

³⁴ D. Outram, *The Body and the French Revolution: Sex, Class, and Political Culture* (New Haven, 1989), 127.

³⁵ J. Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca, 1988), 145.

³⁶ Michael Sydenham, “The Girondins and the question of revolutionary government: A new approach to the problem of political divisions in the national convention,” *French Historical Studies* 10, no. 2 (Fall 1977): 673. doi:10.2307/286974.

³⁷ Amar, original text, year [see Hunt footnote]; as quoted by L. Hunt, *The French Revolution and Human Rights: A Brief Documentary History*, (Bedford, 1996), p. 136-38.

³⁸ Ibid.

women in the public sphere, functioning to underpin women's political quiescence within a republican polity.³⁹ As the two-sex model gained ascendancy, Jacobins suppressed women's participation in the public sphere by targeting revolutionary societies and clubs, claiming that such organizations posed a threat to public safety. Pierre Chaumette denounced women's political activism, arguing that unnatural women "abandoned the pious cares of their household....to come into public spaces."⁴⁰ He threatened women who remained politically active by reminding them that "the impudent Olympe de Gouges...was the first to set up women's societies, who abandoned the cares of her household to get mixed up in the republic and whose head fell beneath the avenging knife of the laws."⁴¹ The execution of unnatural women such as Olympe de Gouges and Madame Roland thus served as a warning against involvement in the French Republic's new public sphere.

Debates over whether women should be understood as categorically dissimilar to men, or whether the female body was simply a deviation from the male norm,⁴² continued through the Enlightenment until the French Revolution. Although individuals who viewed sex on a hierarchy dominated the Enlightenment and the moderate stage of the revolution, during the radical phase, the two-sex model assumed pre-eminence with sometimes violent results. In particular, works by Diderot and Roussel demonstrated the discord between each current of thought during the Enlightenment. Contrary to many mainstream Enlightenment thinkers, Rousseau went further in his support for wholly separate spheres for men and women, maintaining that women should be confined to a domestic life because of their biologically determined maternal destiny. This notion

³⁹ J. Landes. *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca, 1988), 67.

⁴⁰ Chaumette, Speech at City Hall Denouncing Women's Political Activism, 1793 [see Hunt footnote]; as quoted by L. Hunt, *The French Revolution and Human Rights: A Brief Documentary History*, (Bedford, 1996), p. 135-38.

⁴¹ As quoted by J. Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca, 1988), 145.

⁴² L. Steinbrugge. *The Moral Sex: Women's Nature in the French Enlightenment*, trans. Pamela Selwyn (New York, 1995), 42.

of separate spheres was popularized by David and used to justify women's exclusion from the public sphere during the radical stage of the revolution when Jacobins gained power and imposed their Rousseauian agenda. Using language derived from Rousseau's two-sex model to justify markedly un-Rousseauian activities, Olympe de Gouges and Madame Roland were executed as unnatural women for their political activity, serving as a cautionary tale to others. Although women during the French Revolution struggled for political rights, it has since been theorized that "[t]he modern idea of equality between the sexes could appear only when people could imagine 'transcending' their bodies, and women and men could see each other in terms apart from biological functions."⁴³ In particular, the consequence of the dimorphic shift towards construing the sex in terms of dissimilarity resulted in the denial of women's suffrage well into the twentieth century; in particular, women did not gain the right to vote until 1945, since women's suffrage posed a challenge the republican consensus.⁴⁴ However, by examining biologically determined conceptions of sexual difference, socially prescribed roles can be further assessed, allowing for insight as to how patriarchal societies have endured throughout different historical settings.

⁴³ N. Elias as quoted in D. Outram, *The Body and the French Revolution: Sex Class and Political Culture* (New Haven, 1989), 10.

⁴⁴ Paul Smith, "Political Parties, Parliament, and Women's Suffrage in France, 1919-1939." *French History* 11, no. 3 (September 1997), 342. <https://library.macewan.ca/full-record/30h/46093816>.

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