The origins of feminism and the limits of enlightenment

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The publication of the collection of essays *Women, Gender and Enlightenment* (ed. Sarah Knott and Barbara Taylor, Houndsmills: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005) affords an unusual opportunity to confront a myriad of interrelated issues, at once definitional and ideological, that face intellectual historians of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe and America. The 768-page work came out of a highly unusual collaborative research project conducted from 1998 to 2001, “Feminism and Enlightenment, 1650–1850: A Comparative History,” a series of colloquia, conferences, and Internet exchanges enlisting the participation of over a hundred historians in Europe, North America, and Australia. The product of this extensive interaction showcases the contributions of thirty-eight authors, not only covering a broad array of topics but, still more remarkable, displaying a large degree of consensus about issues of interpretative concern. While dozens of books and articles have anticipated pieces of the arguments made in this volume, never has so extensive an attempt been made to pull them together into a cohesive whole.

One central question posed by this undertaking is an evaluative one: how good for women was the Enlightenment? And the answer endorsed by the overwhelming majority of the authors is positive. This essentially favorable view conforms to the perspective of most recent historians of the Enlightenment but diverges from that of many women’s historians and feminist theorists. The collection also highlights many convergent trends within women’s history and intellectual history. Long-term shifts towards the inclusion of hitherto neglected subjects and figures, towards multifaceted cultural history, and towards cross-national comparisons, for example, all gain reinforcement from this work. Its publication pushes us not only to reconsider the relationship between the field of women’s history and current developments in scholarship on the Enlightenment but also to reassess women’s participation in the Enlightenment and the gendered dimensions of Enlightenment thought.

Whereas it used to be that the Enlightenment referred to a semi-coherent system of ideas involving the supremacy of reason, the dictates of natural law, and the progress of history, the term now tends to stand for an eclectic mix of social
practices, cultural institutions, political ideologies, and divergent philosophical positions. One cost of this broader definition is that the Enlightenment threatens to lose its distinctiveness as an analytical category. Instead of standing for an intellectually defined movement, it has come to represent a chronological unit, the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries, and a cultural geography, the modern West. Given that many different and often contradictory intellectual currents run through this time and place, scholarly use of the rubric “Enlightenment” rarely takes place nowadays without the use of qualifiers like “Newtonian,” “radical,” or “Scottish.” Nor can the Enlightenment, defined in these terms, be compared very well to other condensed constructs like Christianity, once regarded as its nemesis, or Romanticism, once described as its dialectical successor. Ideas previously seen as antithetical to the secularism and rationalism once defining the Enlightenment have been reframed as its underside, or as internal conflicts within it. So stretched are the boundaries of the topic that scarcely any innovative ideas of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries lie beyond its intellectual reach.\footnote{For a few of the many efforts to define the Enlightenment and to discuss the definitional problems involved see John Yolton et al., *The Blackwell Companion to the Enlightenment* (Oxford, 1991), 1–10; Dorinda Outram, “What is Enlightenment?”, in *idem, The Enlightenment* (Cambridge, 1995), 1–13; James Schmidt, “What Enlightenment Project?” *Political Theory* 28 (Dec. 2000), 734–57.}

Such an expanded definition of the Enlightenment in part, of course, reflects well-known changes within the history profession as a whole during the past half-century, especially the movement away from “the history of ideas” and the rise of the “new intellectual history” that is more closely allied with social and cultural history. In the face of this transformation, the very fact that the abstraction “Enlightenment” has survived and even, in recent years, achieved a sort of comeback seems noteworthy. It has done so in part by building on scholarly topics in which the study of ideas is secondary, for example the history of the book and the origins of the consumer revolution. Another obvious way that Enlightenment historiography has retained its vitality is by elevating previously obscure writers and texts, while reducing the relative stature of established, canonical figures like Locke, Newton, and the French *philosophes*. The study of general discourses instead of particular intellectual arguments has also given rise to a host of engaging cultural subjects like civic virtue, sensibility, nature, racial perceptions, and, of course, gender. The concepts “civil society” and “the public sphere,” which gained currency among social and political theorists after the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, also demonstrate a revival of interest in classic questions about the historical sources of liberal democracy that point to towards the Enlightenment, broadly conceived. Other related historiographical developments that have produced an expanded definition of the Enlightenment...
include greater attention to variations in national contexts and a heightened appreciation of the long-distance transmission of goods and ideas.

Many of the analytical terms imported into Enlightenment studies—print culture, consumer revolution, public sphere, transnationalism—are only tangentially related to the history of the substance of thought. Where ideological stakes are the highest, of course, the actual content of ideas tends to matter the most. Historical studies of racism, imperialism, gender, and sexuality all bear an obvious relation to the emergence of contemporary identity politics. Scholarly arguments in the 1980s and 1990s about the relative strength of liberalism and classical republicanism in the American Revolution similarly touched on contemporary political and constitutional arguments. Intellectual historians, along with liberals in other fields, have also been challenged by radical postmodernists who question traditionally defined Enlightenment values like reason, equality, and historical progress. Within these debates, the use of the term Enlightenment as a set of ideas has experienced something of a renaissance, and among historians (if not necessarily literary critics) a positive reappraisal of values traditionally associated with the Enlightenment seems to have lately gained the ascendancy. In this broad-gauged effort to subvert negative polemical stereotypes, pro-Enlightenment liberals effectively join ranks with historians who have long been stressing the varied contexts, diffusion, and multiplicity of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century intellectual life. Even though scholars working on specialized topics often shy away from using the word with a capital E and in the singular, the Enlightenment has been rapidly regaining its postwar position as a central topic in intellectual history.²

From the beginning of the “Feminism and Enlightenment” project in 1998, one of its main goals was to bring recent historical work on feminism into dialogue with the burgeoning research in Enlightenment studies. Taking the same expansive view of the Enlightenment that is characteristic of the general scholarship, Women, Gender and Enlightenment unabashedly seizes hold of the term Enlightenment in its title and gives it a capital E. However, the meaning of the term remains as elusive here as it is elsewhere in the historiography. A few of the contributors barely mention the word, and most of them omit the article “the” (as in “sites of Enlightenment,” ix), and tend to use it as an adjective (as in “Enlightenment feminism,” ix). At times, Enlightenment refers to an activity rather than a set of ideas, as in the statement “Enlightenment was a living world” and the phrase “practicing Enlightenment” (xvii). Such choices in syntax reflect the definitional problems that permeate Enlightenment historiography. So elastic

² For salient examples of these recent trends see, for example, Roy Porter and Mikulas Teich, eds., The Enlightenment in National Context (Cambridge, 1981); Peter H. and Keith Baker, What’s Left of Enlightenment? A Postmodern Question (Stanford, 2001); Alan C. Kors, ed., Encyclopedia of Enlightenment, 4 vols. (New York, 2003).
is the term that it stretches almost to the point of shapelessness and risks losing its coherence as a unifying concept. Dror Wahrman points out in his introduction to section 3 that the frequent references to the Enlightenment “world,” “period,” and “age” seem to indicate a span of time rather than an intellectual movement (137). Well aware of this terminological ambiguity, the editors in their general introduction dutifully ask the question, “Did Enlightenment exist?”, but then drop the subject upon acknowledging the difficulties of answering it (xvi–xvii). The closest any contributor comes to hazarding a definition of what, intellectually, the Enlightenment stood for is Barbara Taylor, one of the two editors of the collection, when she underscores its basic commitment to, as she puts it, “the triumph of truth over prejudice, liberty over oppression” (47). Despite its brevity, this is a straightforward if conventional definition, one that works well for several of the essays, including hers on Mary Wollstonecraft, but not for the volume as a whole. The collection encompasses many “Enlightenment” figures who would have shuddered at such a rallying cry, women for whom “truth” meant mystical or Scriptural revelation and “liberty” involved loyalty to a king. What holds the collection together is its emphasis on women and gender and its coverage of time and place—rather than the Enlightenment as an intellectual inclination or mode of thought.

The absence of a clear and consistent definition of the Enlightenment has, of course, certain advantages. As John Robertson observes in his concluding essay, “More than anything the present volume testifies to the benefits of a catholic, inter-disciplinary approach to Enlightenment” (694). There are ways in which the field of women’s history, in particular, has been especially well served by the expansion of the meaning of Enlightenment. For decades the loose boundaries have enabled the study of many hitherto neglected women writers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and afforded them a respected place in the constantly enlarging canon. Some of the most informative essays in this volume offer new interpretations of these by now well-recognized women authors and scientists: the social and political theorists Mary Astell and Mary Wollstonecraft, the literary moralists Marquise de Lambert and Felicité de Genlis, the historian Catherine Macaulay, and the Bolognese physicist Laura Bassi. Other contributions help to recover the voices of still unfamiliar or underrated women writers: for example, Robina Millar, Sydney Owenson, Marie-Thérèse Greoffin, and Elisabeth Marie Clement. Women stand out in these pages as the writers of incidental literature, advice books, devotional tracts, and novels.

Expanding the definition of intellectual roles to include sociable educated women who networked and patronized by means of their conversations, their letter-writing, and their teaching—instead of, or in addition to, their publications—is another striking historiographical development of recent decades amply represented in this book. For example, Clarissa Campbell Orr’s piece on French
literary governesses of the aristocracy like Mme Le Prince de Beaumont and Mme de la Fite, Elizabeth Eger’s on the conversational methods of the “bluestocking” circle around Elizabeth Montagu, Jane Rendall’s on the remarkably well-connected Edinburgh women of the families Millar and Cullen, and Mónica Bolufer Peruga’s on the Spanish women who joined the new economic societies—all underscore the way that women, especially of the middle classes, rode the waves of the new-found respect for female intellect characteristic of the Enlightenment.

From the point of view of intellectual and cultural historians, perhaps an even more important contribution of women’s history has been the concept of gender. This key historiographical development informs virtually all the essays in Women, Gender and Enlightenment—both in studies of debates that were explicitly about the “nature” of women and in discussions of the more nuanced use of masculine and feminine imagery. Only two essays focus directly upon men and masculinity (those by Philip Carter and Arianne Chernock), but since many of the texts explored in the collection were written by men with complicated attitudes towards women (for example Rousseau), the topic of male gender identity often receives detailed and sensitive exploration as well. The book in addition reaches across several nationalities—devoting most of its attention to England and France but also including a few essays on Italy, Spain, and the United States (neglecting Germany, however). And the essays situate women in relation to numerous aspects of Enlightenment culture that have attracted much attention in the last two decades: sexuality, sensibility, commerce, sociability, patronage, humanitarianism, pedagogy, print culture, republicanism, and more. In short, the volume can be seen not only as a step towards a new synthesis but as the culmination of several decades of work in both Enlightenment studies and women’s studies.

Taken as a whole, the collection powerfully demonstrates the ubiquitous presence of women in Enlightenment circles and the way that questions about the nature and status of women kept surfacing in the minds of Enlightenment writers of both sexes. Divided schematically into two parts with nine thematic sub-sections (each prefaced by helpful synthetic and interpretative introductions), the first half concentrates on thinking about women and on the ideas of women intellectuals, while the second half looks more at educated women as actors wielding social and political influence. The one essay on conceptions of masculinity appears suitably in Part I; and the one essay on male advocates of women’s political activism fits well into Part II. This two-part structure reflects the distinction that emerged in the 1980s between gender history (on notions of male–female difference) and women’s history (on women as protagonists). The organizational scheme does not work perfectly, especially since several of the figures covered in this collection were intellectual women who influenced others by articulating their thoughts about gender differences. Inevitably, ideas by and
about women appear in both parts. Inasmuch as Part I concentrates on apolitical and conservative ideas whereas Part II deals more with ideas that in retrospect point towards the emergence of modern feminism, however, the twofold logic accords well with many of the book’s central themes.

Part I, entitled “Women, Men, Enlightenment,” tends to feature women and femininity as topics of intellectual analysis. It addresses a wide range of mostly eighteenth-century French and British moral and political philosophers (for example Montesquieu, Denis Diderot, Adam Smith, John Millar), historians (William Alexander, Antoine Thomas), popular moralists and social critics (Abbé Raynal, the Marchioness de Lambert, Vicesimus Knox, John Gregory, and Mary Wollstonecraft), and authors of fiction (Felicité de Genlis, Germaine de Staël, Margaret Cullen). These Scottish, English, and French depictions of the role and nature of women typically appeared in conjectural works on such subjects as European history, the evolution of human society, and contemporary institutions and manners. Illuminating essays by Cary Catherine Moran, Sylvana Tomaselli, Jenny Mander, and Silvia Sebastiani analyze, for example, the commonly held view that women’s status rose in stages alongside the advancement of society as a whole, from its “primitive” to its “civilized” states. The deep disagreements among Enlightenment writers over how, and how much, women should be educated emerge in particularly sharp relief. Ideas about women and gender differences, interwoven with those about different races and nations, these historians illustrate, tended to alternate between environmental and biological explanations. It is well known among women’s historians and feminist theorists that Wollstonecraft and Rousseau stood at the polar extremes of this argument, but these essays go well beyond this stark contrast and show how many eighteenth-century British and European writers grappled simultaneously with both positions. The revealing discussions by Michèle Cohen, Jean Bloch, Vivien Jones, and Jane Randall point to various ways that increased female education drew support as a means of social improvement, but Anne C. Vila, Dena Goodman and others also make clear that this optimistic perspective never overcame simultaneous fears of the “unnaturalness” of women intellectuals whose overtaxed minds, it was contended, would endanger not only the social order but their own physical health.

That these debates took place amidst a phenomenal growth in the numbers of well-educated and accomplished women throughout Europe is highlighted in the final section of Part I on women intellectuals. The studies by Paula Findlen on the decline of aristocratic influences on Italian women of science, by Elizabeth Eger on the English bluestockings’ advocacy of learned conversation, by Clarissa Campbell Orr on French and English writers of reform-minded conduct books for aristocratic pupils, and by Jane Rendall on the circle of Scottish Whig women writers and philanthropists all demonstrate the ways that arguments over women’s social function and their capacity for education emanated from concerns
that went well beyond the theoretical. The numerous types of intellectual activity that engaged women’s attention also underscore great variation in local and national contexts. Carla Hess’s introduction to this section draws attention to the middle-class basis of much of this activity, although the essays by Paula Findlen and Clarissa Campbell Orr also demonstrate the importance of aristocratic women’s precedent and patronage.

Part II, “Feminism, Enlightenment, and Revolution,” shifts the focus to women as subjects and agents—as social critics, as religious dissenters, and as claimers of rights. A few of the essays in Part I could fit as comfortably in Part II: Vivien Jones’s on Wollstonecraft’s advocacy of sex education, for example, and Jane Randall’s on Scottish women’s critiques of the law of marriage. With the exception of the section on religion, however, almost all of the figures, theories, and attitudes about women discussed in Part II are more egalitarian and political than those in Part I. It is in Part II that the feminist commitments underlying the volume also most strikingly come to the fore. Just as *Women, Gender and Enlightenment* seeks to integrate women’s topics into the existing historiography on the Enlightenment, the essays in Part II add to a rich feminist literature on the legacy of the Enlightenment. The ideas held about women by Locke, Rousseau and other canonical Enlightenment thinkers are staple topics in the specialized scholarship on European and American women’s history, women’s literature, and feminist political theory. And feminist scholars have long been divided in their evaluations of the Enlightenment. Indeed, the fluctuating currents within women’s studies during the past forty years bear considerable responsibility for the ebbing and flowing of the more general scholarly reputation of the Enlightenment. On the one hand, proponents of women’s rights typically consider revolutionaries like Olympe de Gouges and Mary Wollstonecraft to be founding mothers of feminism and more broadly give the Enlightenment much of the credit for the dramatic improvements in female education of the second half of the eighteenth century. On the other hand, some feminist scholars have joined Marxists and postmodernists in attacking the Enlightenment for its elitism, male bias, and eurocentrism. Differing feminist judgments about the Enlightenment have corresponded loosely to differing shades of feminism itself. Those feminists who in the past forty years have stressed male–female similarities and portrayed women’s rights as expanding over time have also, by and large, tended to be more favorable to the Enlightenment than those who have placed more emphasis on male–female differences, ethnic and cultural diversity, and the downsides of modern history.3

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3 This division corresponds, roughly, to theoretical divisions within feminism, between the so-called liberals, on the one hand, and radicals and postmodernists, on the other (with socialists falling somewhere between). Of course, the specialized literature on the Enlightenment often modulates such positions. Far too voluminous to cite here, the
Partly because so few women’s historians are intellectual historians, and partly because the flurry of works about the history of feminism in the 1970s and 1980s had subsided by the 1990s, little has been done recently to bring scholarship on the Enlightenment directly and systematically to bear on feminist concerns. In the past two decades or so, the historical pursuit of women’s social and political equality has received less attention as a scholarly topic than it did previously—despite the considerable attention that has been given by historians to related topics like sexuality, women’s cultural activities, gender definitions, and gender analogies. Indeed, it is a sign of the times that the “Feminism and Enlightenment” project ended up with the title Women, Gender and Enlightenment instead. In the preface the editors Sarah Knott and Barbara Taylor explain that they shifted their focus in order to accommodate eighteenth-century gender attitudes and intellectual trends “which, while they could not be described as ideologically feminist, nonetheless carried important implications for women’s status” (ix). Without this decision to extend the project’s reach beyond feminism Part I would not have been possible, but the original intention to highlight the Enlightenment’s implications for feminism remains at the heart of Part II. Enlightenment ideas about women’s rights, the relationship of women to eighteenth-century revolutions, religious arguments for women’s equality, the emergent ideology of domesticity, and the contributions of female intellectuals who advocated on behalf of women are but a few of the topics of perennial interest to feminists that are addressed in this volume. For this reason, too, Women, Gender and Enlightenment is a most timely and salutary achievement.

As the editors acknowledge at the outset, the major thrust of the book is decidedly pro-Enlightenment. It is not that every aspect of the Enlightenment gets a free pass. Several of the contributors, including Silvia Sebastiani, Sylvana Tomaselli, and John Robertson, express reservations about the ostensibly favorable depiction of women in French and Scottish conjectural histories. A prime target, not surprisingly, is the ubiquitous and mostly condescending celebration of women for their “civilizing” influence on men. In a particularly biting analysis, Silvia Sebastiani exposes the link between the idealization of women and assertions of European racial superiority by demonstrating the invidious distinction made by these evolutionary theorists between the elevation of women in modern “commercial” society and their degradation among the “savages” in America, Asia, and Africa. Such valorization of refined male–female interaction at times, however, ran afoul of the anti-aristocratic strain within the Enlightenment
disparaging the artificiality of polite society. As Barbara Taylor demonstrates in her highly illuminating essay “Feminists versus Gallants,” Mary Wollstonecraft’s withering critique of the ethos of chivalry challenged the prevailing and rather complacent assumptions of historical progress characteristic of much of the Enlightenment. Taylor takes a freshly sympathetic look at what modern feminists have most objected to in Wollstonecraft—her notorious hostility to women and her oft-criticized preference for “masculine and improved philosophy” (quoted on xv). But several other contributors, more in keeping with the interpretations of feminists in the 1980s and early 1990s, take to task the masculinist sides of the Enlightenment. For example, Daniel White’s article on Anna Barbauld shows how her mentor Joseph Priestley harshly set his own rationalism against her emotional piety, and Dena Goodman’s fascinating account of the systematization of spelling by the Académie française reveals the way it raised the bar for women writers who had learned to write phonetically in the manner of speech.

It is the biological essentialism of Rousseau and others that understandably elicits the most negative descriptions of the Enlightenment contained in the volume. The tendency to reduce women’s “nature” to familial tenderness and to deny their capacity for rationality comes particularly into focus in the essays by Anne Vila on French medical literature and Jenny Mander on Diderot. John Robertson similarly draws attention to the distinctively negative, inegalitarian view of women's nature embedded within the materialist, Epicurean current of the Enlightenment represented in such figures as Hobbes and Mandeville. That this misogynist, essentializing current within the Enlightenment ran wide and deep is, however, not a major point of the book. In the essays by Lynn Hunt, Sarah Knott, and Rosemary Zagarri in the closing section of the volume, “Women and Revolutionary Citizenship,” the growth of biological explanations of women’s social inferiority appears to occur only after the American and French Revolutions, as part of the reactionary repression of the liberal, natural-rights Enlightenment that had previously thrown open the doors to women’s equality.

For the vast majority of the collection’s contributors, the objectionable sides of the Enlightenment pale in comparison to the egalitarianism of Enlightenment proponents of female education and women’s civil and political rights. At the book’s center of gravity stands the inspirational Mary Wollstonecraft, the subject of the two highly favorable and incisive essays by Barbara Taylor and Vivien Jones. She is closely surrounded by a circle of similarly laudable Enlightenment feminists including Mary Hays (a piece by Gina Luria Walker), Catherine Macaulay (two essays, by Karen O’Brien and Sarah Hutton), Charles Brockden Brown (in the article by Rosemary Zagarri), and the members of the revolutionary French women’s clubs (in that of Suzanne Desan). Earlier, seventeenth-century, women intellectuals who argued for the equality of women’s minds, such as Lucrezia Marinella and Marie de Gournay, also receive emphasis as important precursors.
(two essays by Siep Stuurman). And a range of other less-renowned authors and activists of the eighteenth century come to light in these essays as creators and beneficiaries of Enlightenment arguments against the subordination of women: English women like Mrs E. Hayly, who joined public debating societies (by Anna Clark); radical male reformers like Thomas Cooper, who demanded the vote for women (by Arianne Chernock); the literary prostitutes Marie Madeleine Jodin and Mary Darby Robinson, who protested against the double standard (by Felicia Gordon); and French revolutionary marriage reformers like the deputy Aubert-Dubayet, for whom the family was a site of political activism (by Suzanne Desan). Several of the contributions show that theories, as well as protagonists, proved conducive to women’s equality. Siep Stuurman, for example, stresses the role of “the Cartesian moment” that proclaimed the dominance of sexless minds over bodies; Caroline Franklin points to the influence of utilitarian ideas about universal benevolence; and both Arianne Chernock and Rosemary Zagarri emphasize the feminist implications of the idea of natural rights. Although these historians’ interpretations deepen our understanding of these crucial intellectual developments, the tendency to view them as ideologically progressive is, of course, hardly new. What makes the pro-Enlightenment position taken in this book innovative rather than simply passé is its dialogue with recent cultural critics of the Enlightenment, including postmodernist feminists. This revisionism is most evident in the footnotes, where there are frequent references to the contrasting views of such influential scholars of the 1980s and 1990s as Joan Scott, Carole Pateman, Joan Landes, Linda Kerber, and Genevieve Lloyd.  

If the book’s qualified defense of the Enlightenment were limited to restoring feminist credentials to its egalitarian rationalism and universalism, there would be little need to depart from an old-fashioned definition based on its most progressive ideas. At most, one might wish to distinguish between conservative and radical “Enlightenments.” However, the book’s overall benign view depends as much on its deliberate enlarging of the Enlightenment’s tent beyond these bounds. Even Quaker women ministers, whom Phyllis Mack describes as driven by spiritual motivations, find a place in this capacious conception of the Enlightenment, simply because they partly assimilated values of reason and humanitarianism. Ruth Perry also claims for the Enlightenment Mary Astell’s Platonic arguments for women’s rational equality despite Astell’s devotion to

4 Key works by these generally counter-Enlightenment feminists include Joan Scott, Gender and the Politics of History (New York, 1988); Carole Pateman, The Sexual Contract (Stanford, 1988); Joan Landes, Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution (Ithaca, NY, 1988); Linda Kerber, Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America (Chapel Hill, 1980); and Genevieve Lloyd, Man of Reason: “Male” and “Female” in Western Philosophy (London, 1984).
High Church Anglicanism, her royalist ideology, and her antipathy to Lockean individualism and materialism. “[H]er intellectuality, her argumentativeness, and her pride in self,” as Perry puts it, “resonated with the zeitgeist even though the particular content of her own ideas ran counter to it” (367). Similarly, many women of the eighteenth century who were notably anti-egalitarian and religiously orthodox, such as Hester Chapone and others in the English bluestocking circle (the subjects of two excellent essays by Elizabeth Eger and Norma Clarke), fall squarely within the Enlightenment fold. Even in Part II, which is thematically focused on feminism and revolution, several of the women’s only relationship with anything resembling feminism, or even the status of women, is simply their own prominence. To have been an accomplished, articulate European woman of the eighteenth century seems virtually enough reason to qualify for inclusion in this volume. (Hannah More, one of Wollstonecraft’s most virulent critics, occasionally surfaces as perhaps the only significant female figure outside the umbrella of the Enlightenment.) The expansive and inclusive strategy employed in the collection tends to circumvent divisive issues by incorporating both sides of debated positions under the rubric of the Enlightenment. Religiosity and skepticism, rationalism and sentimentalism, idealism and materialism, essentialism and environmentalism, all receive more or less the same emphasis. The recurring employment of words like “contradiction,” “tension,” “complexity,” and “ambiguity” to describe the Enlightenment effectively undercuts most generalizations about it, from the old-fashioned to the postmodern. In this absorption of countervailing tendencies, Women, Gender and Enlightenment conforms, of course, to the wide scope so characteristically taken in recent Enlightenment historiography. Citing Dorinda Outram’s 1995 survey, The Enlightenment, Kate Soper states in her concluding assessment of the collection, “Everything in this volume tends, in fact, to confirm . . . [the] ‘capsule’ conception of the Enlightenment as containing sets of debates, stresses and concerns rather than representing a single, unified value system” (p. 707).

But one consequence of so inclusive a use of the term “Enlightenment” is the erasure of other seventeenth- and eighteenth-century sources of feminism. The pliable category of Enlightenment gets pushed so far that it encompasses virtually all variations of creative thinking about women and by women over the course of two entire centuries. The book therefore implicitly raises—but does not sufficiently answer—the question of whether there were any non-Enlightenment seventeenth- and eighteenth-century intellectual roots of the European and American women’s movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. One affirmative suggestion posed in a few of the essays is that there were important influences upon feminism that were antecedent to the Enlightenment like Augustian-Platonism and the querelle de femmes of the Renaissance. Siep Stuurman, in particular, expresses concern that the volume’s location of arguments for women’s
equality within a chronologically defined “Enlightenment” time period may exaggerate the importance of the eighteenth century relative to the sixteenth century in inaugurating modern debates about the status of women: “Early-modern feminism cannot, therefore, be explained as a belated application of Enlightenment philosophy to gender: it should rather be regarded as one of the critical discourses that went into the making of the Enlightenment” (371; his italics). Mónica Bolufer Peruga’s analysis of Benito J. Feigoo’s 1726 Defence of Women implicitly makes a similar point by demonstrating the seamless transition from a Spanish tradition of extolling women’s superior “moral excellence” that dated back to the fifteenth century to the more “modern feminist” assertions of women’s intellectual equality of the eighteenth century. Phyllis Mack, too, highlights pre-Enlightenment origins when she presents the religious foundations of her eighteenth-century Quaker women’s activism as a legacy of their seventeenth-century mystical zeal. According to these writers, the Enlightenment as much served as a conduit for older forms of proto-feminist egalitarianism as it did as a creator of new ones.

This debate over chronology, however interesting to historians, still leaves intact the impression that between the late seventeenth and the late eighteenth centuries, at least, the Enlightenment was the sole carrier of progress for women. What alternative developments in the period might be viewed as contributing to the emergence of modern feminism? To answer this question it is useful to recall that, a generation ago, scholars juxtaposed Enlightenment both to Christianity and to Romanticism. It was those contrasts that defined both the substance and the boundaries of Enlightenment. In widening the definition of Enlightenment, Women, Gender and Enlightenment, like other recent scholarship, effectively eliminates these oppositional constructs by subsuming them within the undifferentiated “period” of the Enlightenment. The consequence is an unfortunate distortion of important aspects of the history of women and feminism. To throw into relief the multifaceted eighteenth-century origins of the modern women’s movement, the differentiation of Christianity and Romanticism from the Enlightenment still provides useful intellectual leverage.

As far as Christianity is concerned, this criticism might seem strange to a reader of this collection, because, as Sarah Knott and Barbara Taylor make clear in their introduction, “Perhaps the most revisionary theme of this volume, or certainly the one that most starkly contradicts standard views of the Enlightenment, is the centrality of religious discourses to enlightened debates about gender” (xviii). Indeed, given the anti-religious bent of both Enlightenment and feminist scholarship, the inclusion of a prominent section entitled “Feminism and Enlightened Religious Discourses” signals a welcome departure from the mainstream. Taylor, whose own 2003 intellectual biography of Wollstonecraft pays unusual attention to her religious beliefs, observes in the section’s preface that for some radical women living in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries “religion was an intellectual
launching pad as well as a credo” (414).\(^5\) The section’s main thrust is to push forward several examples of Catholic, Quaker, and Rational Dissenting women in whom the convergence of intellect and piety fomented progressive ideas about women. Siep Stuurman opens this series of essays with an admirably compact survey of the arguments for the equality of the sexes found among Catholic women—from Christine de Pisan in the early fifteenth century to several notable French and Italian intellectuals of the seventeenth (Lucrezia Marinella, Marie de Gournay, Arcangela Taraboti, and Gabrielle Suchon). Phyllis Mack similarly embraces the general theme of women’s religious egalitarianism in her subtle and provocative interpretation of the eighteenth-century transformation of Quaker activism. Grounding the religious authority of Quaker women in their transcendent spirituality, she traces the trajectory from seventeenth-century public displays of enthusiasm to late eighteenth-century social and religious reform movements influenced by a more sober Enlightenment humanitarianism. Out of these organizations led by Quaker women would emerge the first women’s rights organizations.

Nowhere was the merger of Enlightenment, religion, and feminism more complete than in the politically radical circles within Rational Dissent in the 1790s. As Gina Luria Walker’s wonderfully revealing portrait of Mary Hays makes clear, Hays never abandoned her core commitment to Christianity while at the same time boldly proclaiming the equal rights of women. She proved remarkably able to combine her steadfast piety with the materialist and empiricist theories of David Hartley and Helvétius, taking inspiration from her Unitarian mentors Robert Robinson and Joseph Priestley. Sarah Hutton’s subtle reading of Catherine Macaulay similarly reveals an underlying intellectual connection between her feminism and her anti-voluntaristic theological beliefs in compulsory ethical obligation. These three outstanding and exceptionally radical English women—Wollstonecraft, Hays, and Macaulay—taken together, represent perhaps the most compelling examples of the integration of Enlightenment feminism and liberal Christian faith.

Two out of the five essays in this section on religion, however, fit awkwardly into its Enlightenment feminist theme. The Dissenting poet Anna Barbauld, the subject of Daniel White’s essay, certainly moved in Enlightenment circles and benefited from the Enlightenment’s support of women’s education. Her commitment to the ideas of the Enlightenment seems, however, shaky at best. She got into a dispute with Priestley, finding his rationalism “cold-hearted.” Priestley, in turn, regarded her affective style of religion (which White interprets as derived from the “Puritan sublime”) as a betrayal of Dissent. Even less evident is Barbauld’s relationship with feminism. While not as anti-feminist as Hannah

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More, she strongly disapproved of Wollstonecraft and Hays, and she refused to join the writer Maria Edgeworth in launching a woman’s periodical, declaring, “There is a great difference between a paper written by a lady, and as a lady” (quoted on 474–5). Loosely framed within the sentimental ideal of woman as distinctively religious, White’s portrait of Barbauld shows her to be well versed in the “culture of sensibility.” But she scarcely emerges in these pages as an exemplar of either Enlightenment religion or Enlightenment feminism. Norma Clarke’s essay on the bluestocking circle of devotional and didactic women writers in mid-eighteenth-century England also deviates from the feminist Enlightenment theme. Such decidedly conservative religious women as Catherine Talbot and Hester Chapone made no claims for the equality of the sexes. Instead, they assumed the stance of authoritative instructors of impressionable young women readers who, in their view, needed to learn to control their emotions, defer to their superiors (including their husbands and fathers), and channel their thoughts towards God. Like Barbauld, these writers were educated, bookish, and influential women, but it is noteworthy that neither White nor Clarke uses the term “Enlightenment” to refer to them.

It is Phyllis Mack’s essay, however, that raises the most fundamental questions about the integration of religion and Enlightenment. Identifying what she calls “a tension at the heart of Enlightenment Quakerism,” she describes women’s involvement in the eighteenth-century movement for a revitalized Quaker discipline. Arguing against the view that their relatively restrained style of benevolent activism reflected a turn away from the spiritual ecstasies of early Quakerism towards a secular, Enlightened humanitarianism, Mack insists on the continuing primacy of their original mysticism. They were acting not “by the principle of individual free will” (455), but out of a conviction about what was “right” (443). This moral conviction derived only partly, in their view, from the exercise of human reason. More fundamentally it stemmed from an experience of self-transcendence that was itself often stimulated by pain and sacrifice modeled on the atonement of Christ. Mack’s argument is a feminist one, but one that runs against the grain of the book as a whole and raises questions about Barbara Taylor’s introduction to the section on religion in particular. Mack, like feminist critics of the Enlightenment, enlists the Quakers to challenge modern secular values of autonomy and individual agency typically attributed to the Enlightenment. As she weighs the factors that produced Quaker women’s activism in progressive reform, she concludes that the “interaction of religious and Enlightenment values” produced “a culture in which religious values remained fundamental” (443).

If several of the religious women featured in this collection appear to be only tangentially related to the Enlightenment, what about the still more popular religious movements of the period? What about, for example, women’s participation
in benevolent reform organizations within mainstream late eighteenth-century evangelicalism? Or the messianic sectarianism of Ann Lee and Joanna Southcott? Aside from a few pages in Jane Rendall’s piece on Scottish women, none of these developments is discussed at any length in this volume. Yet popular revivalism and pietism in various guises were salient features of the eighteenth-century religious landscape, not only in Britain and America but also in Germany (a country, lamentably, not covered in the collection). Historians of American and English women have long appreciated the galvanizing effects of female participation in popular religious movements and have emphasized the links between women’s religious activism, women’s education, and other progressive social and political reforms, including, eventually, the women’s rights movements. It is arguable that such religious women had more in the long term to do with the rise of English and American feminism than the conservative, albeit more educated, women of letters described so well by Norma Clarke. The gendered association of religion with the feminine also, of course, headed in a decidedly anti-feminist direction within parts of the Enlightenment, and several of the essays in this collection rightly stress the tendency of prominent male intellectuals, including Rousseau and many of the Scots, to pair female religiosity with deficiencies in female intellect. In France, compared to England and the United States, the relationship between religion and feminism proved especially problematic. There, too, as Olwen Hufton and Suzanne Desan have shown elsewhere, religion became “feminized” and even briefly radicalized during the French Revolution, but female piety generally took a far less activist and socially reformist form. Among the leadership of the French Revolution, the negative stereotype of the femme fanatique solidified during the dechristianization campaigns of the 1790s, coinciding with the rapid rise and subsequent suppression of the secular Parisian women’s movement. The contrasting relationship of religion, feminism, and the Enlightenment in France, England, and America is a subject regrettably missing from Women, Gender


and Enlightenment. Germany—at once pietist, Enlightened, and non-feminist—would have afforded an especially illuminating set of comparisons.

In contrast to Christianity, the term “Romanticism,” interestingly, appears in these pages scarcely at all, neither as an epoch nor as an intellectual category. Caroline Franklin’s reading of texts from the early 1800s by Helen Maria Williams, Germaine Stael, and Sydney Owenson comes the closest to addressing the relationship between the Enlightenment and Romanticism. Yet the Romanticism featured in her analysis is exclusively that of conservative backlash. Prevented from fulfilling the progressive Enlightenment dream of active citizenship, Franklin argues, these women fell back on novels of courtship couched in a framework of “romantic patriotism” to express their continuing opposition to patriarchal power and, metaphorically, to the imperial governments of Britain and Napoleonic France. Romanticism itself, according to this view, offered little other than the protective cover of “Burkean sentimentalism” to disguise the persistence of Enlightenment critiques of oppression.

More typically, however, the collection simply assimilates the non-rational qualities conventionally labeled as Romantic into the Enlightenment. “It would be mistaken to think of reason as the rallying cry of the Enlightenment thinkers,” writes Sylvana Tomaselli, claiming that “the ‘Age of Sentiments’, ‘Sentimentality’, ‘Feelings’, ‘Passions’, ‘love’ or ‘Imagination’ are apter titles for the movement of ideas in the eighteenth century” (711). In his introduction to the section “Sex and Sensibility,” Dror Wahrman similarly frames “attitudes to gendered subjectivity in the age of the Enlightenment” in terms of a set of contradictions: male rationality versus female emotionality, artificiality versus authenticity (as he puts it, “the Macaroni versus the Man of Feeling”). These tensions, he acknowledges, were not unique to the period, but he describes them as becoming particularly urgent in what he calls “the Enlightenment ‘project’ broadly construed” (137). The section’s three essays following his comments illustrate the considerable merits of Wahrman’s claims about the eighteenth century, but they generally leave aside the question of what the “Enlightenment project” was.

The first of these contributions under the heading “Sex and Sensibility,” Vivien Jones’s contribution on Wollstonecraft’s support of sex education, at least uses the term Enlightenment frequently, both to refer to Wollstonecraft’s rationalistic feminism and to underscore her interest in science and medicine. The next two selections, however, which leave the terrain of science and get closer to the topic of emotional expression, invoke neither the Enlightenment nor Romanticism as general frameworks but turn to the “culture of sensibility” instead. In his penetrating essay “Tears and the Man,” Phillip Carter reveals how the display of male emotional vulnerability went in and out of fashion among late eighteenth-century Britons. The widespread valorization of men who wept openly, he shows us, expressed the developing philanthropic conviction that sympathetic
responses to suffering were the ultimate sign of virtue. The telling example of Edmund Burke, who at once tearfully decried the fate of Marie Antoinette and accused Rousseau’s sentimentalism of being cold-blooded deception, however, illustrates the volatility of an ethos of tenderness that could be turned against those regarded as either effeminate or fake. In the essay that follows, Robin Howells elaborates upon the singular case of Rousseau, portraying his tortured sexual ambivalence not as Janus-faced, in the way Burke would have it, but as variously manifest in his alternately Spartan, philosophical (male) republicanism and his expressive, novelistic (female) sentimentality. Taken together, Carter and Howells offer subtle readings of texts concerned with the complex relationship between gender and emotional expressiveness. The tensions they describe are ones that, by any definition, pervade Romanticism as well as the Enlightenment. Perhaps shrewdly, they avoid the use of both words.

It is particularly helpful to see “sensibility” as a bridge term spanning the Enlightenment and Romanticism. It is a concept tied to Enlightenment environmentalism and materialism, on the one hand, especially inasmuch as it derived from corporeal, scientific theories about sensate stimuli and the reception of nerves and brain fibers. On the other hand, it tended to be used interchangeably with “sentiment,” and to arise from the more immaterial perspective of “sentimentalism” which possessed strong affinities to Romanticism in its privileging of intangible emotions and the subjective experience of the sublime. In this collection the Enlightenment side of sensibility is brought out especially well in Sarah Knott’s article on the American revolutionary physician Benjamin Rush. She connects Rush’s well-known educational proposals to inculcate civic virtue within the American republic to his underlying environmentalist theory of physical “sensibility” as the route to morality. In his consideration of women, however, she argues that his environmentalism gave way to a conservative essentialism in which female sensibility stood in opposition to reason. Her perspective jibes with those of several other contributors in the volume, including Jean Bloch, Rosemary Zagarri, John Robertson, and Kate Soper, who interpret assertions of female difference as naturalizing and who regard both sentimentalism and domesticity as unilaterally conservative and antithetical to feminism. Mary Wollstonecraft’s acerbic comments about the destructiveness of the ideal of women’s sensibility (she meant what today we might call hypersensitive or highly strung) stands as an early feminist condemnation of what historians still tend to see as essentially retrograde.

And yet there are other features of the “culture of sensibility” that call for less dismissive treatment from contemporary feminist historians. Even Wollstonecraft could use the word approvingly, particularly in her unfinished last novel, *Maria or the Wrongs of Woman*. Barbara Taylor’s fascinating book about the evolution of Wollstonecraft’s thought lays particular emphasis on her rarified
conceptions of imagination and genius—a previously neglected side of her that, like her religious faith, places her closer to Margaret Fuller than to Thomas Paine. It is striking that Taylor’s Wollstonecraft biography is published in a series on Romanticism and that the word Enlightenment hardly ever appears. Within Women, Gender and Enlightenment, however, only a few essays draw attention to the feminist implications contained within the idea of women’s sensibility. Both Arianne Chernock’s account of English men who advocated women’s suffrage and Suzanne Desan’s piece on French revolutionary marriage reformers stress the way that this glorifying feminine imagery could be turned politically to the advantage of women. Mary Catherine Moran’s revisionist interpretation of the Scottish moralist John Gregory shows him exalting women for their possession of greater “sensibility of heart,” a characteristic he saw as essential to sociability and religion and which he subversively valued, in men as well as women, more highly than reason (22).

As Moran’s essay suggests, the exploration of the human capacity for sympathetic connection with others was a notable hallmark of the subjectivist strain of eighteenth-century psychological theory. Once again, the category of Enlightenment partly fails us. The positive evaluation of emotion and intuition—a defining trait of Romanticism—is at best seen at the very edge of the Enlightenment, not at its center. Rousseau, often seen as straddling the Enlightenment and Romanticism, expressed these views, as did Anthony Ashley Cooper, Third Earl of Shaftesbury and a handful of Scottish moral philosophers including Francis Hutcheson, David Hume, and Adam Smith. All these Enlightenment figures, as well as other more obscure ones, drew attention to the way that individuals vicariously experience one another’s feelings and saw this capability, rather than the exercise of reason, as the foundation of morality.

This tendency to privilege human sympathy over reason was, however, by no means pervasive within the Enlightenment as a whole. The gap between the sentimentalism of Hutcheson and the rationalism of Voltaire or Diderot could not be wider. Even among the Scottish moralists, leading champions of “common-sense realism” like Thomas Reid, Dugald Stewart, and Adam Ferguson disavowed moral sentiments in favor of moral reasoning. The Enlightenment was divided on this key philosophical point, as well as over its assessment of the more culturally diffuse, late eighteenth-century valorization of “sensibility.” It was the distinctively sentimentalist current that ran into parts of religious evangelicalism (in America, the theology of Jonathan Edwards) and to a degree anticipated the anti-rationalism of what came to be known as Romanticism. Here, too, a comparison with Germany might be fruitful. In the long run, it can be argued, such a subjectivist psychology carried on through the nineteenth century into both psychoanalysis and current moral theories about mutual human recognition. Such ideas—along with the Enlightenment’s recognition
of women’s capacity to reason—have also contributed in deeply ramifying ways to the evolution of modern feminism. One sees their long-term impact, for example, in American “consciousness-raising groups” of the late 1960s and 1970s and in the international development of feminist psychoanalytic theory. But inasmuch as *Women, Gender and Enlightenment* touches on these matters at all, their relationship with feminism appears negative or obscure.

As an illustration of the cost of this omission, one particularly vexed issue for modern feminism stands out for consideration in an eighteenth-century context: motherhood. It is impossible to appreciate from a reading of *Women, Gender and Enlightenment* the degree to which mothering came to be thought about differently over the course of the eighteenth century. The little that appears on the theme tends to concentrate narrowly on mothers’ educational responsibilities to children. In the essays by Michèle Cohen, Jean Bloch, and Clarissa Campbell Orr, for example, one sees how the depiction of mothers as teachers of their children served to illustrate the social utility of increased female education and to strengthen the case for women’s equal possession of reason. Sarah Knott and Caroline Franklin similarly remind us that within the American and French revolutionary movements some republicans also invoked the duty of mothers to inculcate patriotic virtues in the next generation of citizens. Far more unusual were arguments that motherhood entitled women themselves to political participation, a position Arriane Chernock ascribes to the radical Thomas Spence, and which Wollstonecraft herself held in her insistence that women would become better mothers when they become socially and politically equal.

The most pervasive affirmations of the moral value of motherhood did not derive from Enlightenment beliefs in women’s reasoning capacities and natural rights. When the Scottish moralist Lord Kames recommended that mothers become expert in “the knowledge of human nature and the art of improving the heart,” in the course of criticizing Rousseau’s neglect of children’s need for moral education, he did not mean that mothers needed to instruct them in either academic subjects or in patriotic citizenship. Rather, he, like many other eighteenth-century writers, portrayed an affective, interactive relationship between mother and child as fundamental to the fostering of human benevolence. This idealized maternal bond could be explained in a variety of ways: as the product of innate women’s nature (most notoriously, in Rousseau), as an offshoot of a distinctively female religiosity (for example, Hannah More), or (as in the case of Wollstonecraft) as something to be cultivated through the pursuit of knowledge. Adam Smith stressed the non-biological quality of the attachment to children in gender-neutral terms: “I consider what is called natural affection as

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more the effect of the moral than of the supposed physical connection between the parent and the child."9 While some republican writers still saw the family as an extension of self-interest, the growing trend in the eighteenth century was towards viewing familial love as the core of more impersonal social obligations.

The question of where, intellectually, this development came from, to be sure, no simple answer. Some of its roots extend back to classical and biblical times. As far as the eighteenth century is concerned, one credible source, certainly, is the sentimentalist side of the Enlightenment itself. Another is an increasing feminized evangelicalism (at least in North America and Britain). Another can be described as early Romanticism. Within all three of these movements the idealization of motherhood was part and parcel of the eighteenth-century “culture of sensibility” that continued to thrive in Romantic and evangelical circles long after the eclipse of the revolutionary Enlightenment.

Feminists are often too quick to condemn the sentimental depiction of motherhood that arose in the late eighteenth century as a conservative justification for age-old restrictions on women. To be sure, that was part of it. Several of the essays in Women, Gender and Enlightenment show how the dichotomous idea of male and female “separate spheres” could in certain contexts preclude the participation of women in social and political life. Feminist historians have also skeptically interpreted the rise of positive maternal imagery in England and France as part of nationalist political programs to promote population growth. But the newfound glorification of women as mothers also reflected a fundamental revaluation of the emotional sides of older feminine stereotypes that went far beyond reducing women to the traditional care of small children. Women in their sentimental capacities as mothers appeared in positions of authority that radiated beyond the family, as qualities of heartfelt empathy came to be viewed as essential to social justice and vital to progressive reform.10

To make a feminist case for the eighteenth-century upgrading of motherhood one needs, admittedly, to withstand what to modern ears may sound like repulsive gush and to acknowledge that some of the most flowery paens to motherhood, like Rousseau’s, still assumed women’s inferiority. But to stop with the misogyny built into the idea of women as weaker and less rational than men distorts a still larger historical picture. There were, from the beginning, both conservative and progressive versions of the celebration of motherhood. As Moran’s lucid depiction

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10 The many works tracing the strands of “maternalist feminism” include Anne M. Boylan, The Origins of Women’s Activism (Chapel Hill, 2002); Seth Koven and Sonya Michel, eds., Mothers of a New World: Maternalist Politics and the Origins of Welfare States (New York, 1993); Molly Ladd-Taylor, Mother-Work: Women, Child Welfare and the State (Urbana, IL, 1994).
of John Gregory makes particularly clear, not everyone valued rationality over sentiment, and the upholding of female virtue could lead to serious social criticism. Even fervent advocates of women’s rights, including Wollstonecraft and the American writer Judith Sargent Murray, described motherhood in highly sentimental terms without compromising their insistence on women’s intellectual capabilities.11

The glorification of motherhood so characteristic of the late eighteenth century was but one manifestation of the still more general tendency of the period—found in the Enlightenment as well as in evangelical religion and in early Romanticism—to upgrade the cultural value assigned to emotional attachments and empathic identification. Whether seen as a part of the Enlightenment or as oppositional to it, this side of the eighteenth-century legacy is vitally important to modern feminism as well as to the history of the women’s movements in the nineteenth-century in the United States and England. It has had enormous impact on other progressive social causes, from abolitionism to antiwar activism, not to mention upon literature, theology, and numerous academic disciplines. Although these connections have long been recognized by historians, only a few of the essays in *Women, Gender and Enlightenment*—those by Moran, Mack, and Desan especially—come close to this line of interpretation.

This neglect has something to do with the volume’s revisionist, positive view of the Enlightenment and its related critique of “difference” feminism. Regrettably, the conception of feminism underlying the bulk of this collection flattens into what in the parlance of modern feminism is known as “liberal.” A kind of complacency inheres in its stress on Enlightenment goals that middle-class Western women have today already attained: access to higher education and the possession of what Lynn Hunt calls the “ultimate prize” of political rights (568). Of course, those of us who place great stock in women’s intellectual capabilities have debts to the rationalism of the Enlightenment and its advancement of women’s education. Nor would we give up the vote. Yet the “age of the Enlightenment” also creatively addressed more intractable problems that still plague women (and men) today, even in the most democratic, individual rights-bearing, and democratic parts of the world. The developing notions of women’s distinctive “sympathy,” however reactionary this may sometimes appear today, counteracted the social devaluation of what is still now the “women’s work” of caring for the weak and the dependent—for children, the sick, and the elderly.

To ask this collection of essays to stretch the Enlightenment still farther is perhaps asking too much. Its expanded definition of the Enlightenment already gets close to the breaking point. Profiting from this breadth,

Gender and Enlightenment goes far to correct caricatures of the Enlightenment as unilaterally bad for women. But perhaps it is now time, once again, to contract the boundaries of what we call the Enlightenment so that it stands for a flexible combination of discernible ideas rather than for an entire “age” or “world.” Such a redefinition would at a minimum enable us to identify thoughts of the eighteenth century that did not derive from the Enlightenment and to discern some non-Enlightenment eighteenth-century antecedents of feminism. It might also encourage us to embrace a more generous (and perhaps more transformative) meaning of feminism itself.