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978-1-107-08583-1 - A History of Women's Political Thought in Europe, 1700–1800

Karen Green

Excerpt

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Introduction

In 1804 the Irish novelist, educationalist, and friend of progress, Maria Edgeworth (1767–1849) suggested to Anna Laetitia Barbauld (née Aikin, 1743–1825) that they might collaborate on the production of a literary magazine, which would be solely devoted to articles by women, and to which ‘all the literary ladies’ of the day would be invited to contribute. Barbauld rejected the proposition, seeing little in common among the large number of women whose various and discordant views were then appearing in print. She suggested:

There is no bond of union among literary women, any more than among literary men; different sentiments and different connections separate them much more than the joint interest of their sex would unite them. Mrs Hannah More would not write along with you or me, and we should probably hesitate at joining Miss Hays, or if she were living, Mrs Godwin.¹

The objection that Barbauld makes to a magazine devoted only to the works of women might equally be raised against the current enterprise. Women's political attitudes and arguments are as diverse as those of men. Is there enough in the ‘joint interest of their sex’ to justify devoting a work to the political thought of European women during the Enlightenment, to the exclusion of men? This volume is predicated on the assumption that there is. For, despite the differences among them, there are commonalities in women's political situation, and the trajectory of the history of political thought looks rather different when examined through women's works. Indeed, concentrating on the way in which the political issues of the day were developed by women throws new light on the intellectual history of Europe, and on the transition during the Enlightenment from a period when patriarchal or parental models of political relations were dominant,

¹ William McCarthy, *Anna Laetitia Barbauld: Voice of the Enlightenment* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), p. 360.

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to one in which more egalitarian, social contract models began to proliferate.

Inevitably, women's political ideas cannot be understood in complete isolation from men's views, for the standard works of political theory form the background for women's engagement with politics. Nevertheless, it will turn out that the women whose works are discussed here rarely engaged exclusively with a particular man's philosophy, but more often developed their own responses to the social issues of their time. This means that one can in fact engage with their arguments relatively independently from a detailed account of men's publications.

One benefit of looking at political theory through the works of women is that, when women's contributions are surveyed, enlightenment political philosophy has a rather different character to that normally assumed. Firstly, although not all the women whose political views canvassed here were concerned with sexual politics, many were. These authors' attitudes to women's general lack of political power colour, in various ways, their general political opinions. Thus, in women's works the position of women in society comes to the fore, and is treated as an integral part of political thought. Since the 1980s, feminist critics of standard political theory have asserted that it takes the political subject to be male. And while this is often true of male authors, female authors during the eighteenth century both explicitly and implicitly recognise that women, as well as men, make up the polity. Arguments about marriage, divorce, education, and women's oppression are integrated by them into general theories of toleration, political legitimacy, rights, and the ends of government, in ways that are not always what one might expect. Often also, critiques of men's exploitation of vulnerable women carry over into general critiques of the vices of the powerful, and of the exploitation of the vulnerable.

Indeed, one could hazard a generalisation and argue that for men, relations with other men constitute the essence of politics, and for women, also, it is relations with *men* which are fundamentally political. Politics is about the organisation of society and the distribution of power in its many facets, physical, economic, persuasive, conventional, and reproductive. The foundational texts of European political theory, Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *Politics*, discuss various different ways that the organisation of power among men might be constituted, from democratic sharing of power, rule by an aristocracy or meritocracy, to rule by a single individual. In these texts, the distribution of power among men is the fundamental political problem, and, as was argued by Susan Moller Okin, women, as mediators of reproductive and economic power, tend to be

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treated functionally; being among the goods to be distributed, means to, or obstacles to, various kinds of distribution of male power, rather than recognised as participants in the constitutional process.² Plato's relatively egalitarian proposals with regard to women guardians in the *Republic* are part of an ideal in which men have wives in common, in order to combat the conflict that arises between the male rulers' private interests and their duty to govern for the common good.³ He is not primarily interested in women's right to political status, but in the obstacles that are placed in the way of the communal good by women's commitment to their own children. Aristotle argues, by contrast, that it is only possession of private interests, his own wife and children, which motivates a man to identify with a state and the common good.⁴ For these authors, women do not enter into politics in their own right, but only in relation to men.

For women, too, relations with other women seem rarely to be understood as political. While women do compete with each other for power and resources, and while productive men are, from women's point of view, sources of these goods, there has never been a society in which a single woman, or group of armed women, has monopolised power over all the men (despite stories of Amazonian cultures). This, I would argue, is because of the difference between men's and women's reproductive function. A woman cannot increase her reproductive success markedly by monopolising men, in the way in which a man can increase his success by monopolising access to women.⁵ Thus for women, their position in society, relative wealth, and political power becomes dependent on their position in relation to men, and the power structures that those men maintain. In many societies women do implicitly pay a good deal of attention to their political relationships with other women, but they do this by means of control of marriage relations, sexuality, and their relations with men, not through the establishment of direct political alliances with other women. As Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) observed, in general, 'Common-wealths have been erected by the Fathers, not by the Mothers of families.'⁶ In traditional societies women play politics from within a

² Susan Moller Okin, *Women in Western Political Thought* (Princeton University Press, 1979).

³ Julia Annas, 'Plato's Republic and Feminism', *Philosophy* 51 (1976), 307–21.

⁴ Aristotle, *Politics*, II.2–3, 1261a–1262a.

⁵ This is what is correct in Carole Pateman's controversial claim that the social contract is a sexual contract for access to women's bodies, in *The Sexual Contract* (Cambridge: Polity, 1988). For an insightful account of the competition among women for resources, written from a sociobiological point of view, see Sarah Hrdy, *Mother Nature* (London: Vintage, 2000).

⁶ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge University Press, 1991), II.20, p. 140.

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structure of family or kin, in which their capacity to act is mediated by the distribution of power among men.

Thus when in the early modern period women began to read and respond to political works, which had been written by and for men, they found themselves represented as social inferiors. Moreover, men expressed in their texts their experience of women as sexual, without theorising this as political. In contrast to relations with members of their own sex, with whom men typically establish political relationships based on power, skills, and alliances, men experience their relationship with women through affective relations with mothers and sisters, and erotic relations with potential sexual partners. Women strike at men's hearts, and equally at their groins. Traditionally when men wrote about their relations with women these texts were not interpreted as political, but as romantic or sexual. Women began to respond to the consequent representation of themselves as inferior sexualised beings in works such as Christine de Pizan's (1364–1430) *City of Ladies* and Moderata Fonte's *The Worth of Women*: clear political responses to representations of women's social inferiority. These texts have not in general been read as contributions to European political theory, but it is arguable that they are the site of women's early interventions into their political relationships with men, and the first place where sexual politics is theorised.⁷ Soon after the appearance of these works women began writing novels. This is the genre that has historically been the most accessible medium available to women to represent their political position *vis à vis* men, and also to debate with other women how women and men ought to behave and contribute to society. Thus, in this work, as in the earlier *A History of Women's Political Thought in Europe, 1400–1700*, a certain number of novels will be read as political texts in which the politics of male–female relations, and in particular the structure of marriage, are theorised.

It is not only the debate over women's place in society that looks different when women's texts are brought to the fore. The central debates of the eighteenth century are cast in a rather different light. Academic political philosophy has tended to concentrate on a few authors whose political ideas are thought to culminate in the political philosophy of the Enlightenment; traditionally, on Thomas Hobbes, John Locke (1632–1704), Adam Smith (1723–90), Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78), and Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), or in a newer account of the 'Radical Enlightenment' on Benedict de Spinoza (1632–77), Pierre Bayle (1647–1706), and Claude-Adrien Helvétius

⁷ Colette Cazenobe, *Au malheur des dames: Le roman féminin au XVIII^e siècle* (Paris: Champion, 2006).

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(1715–71).⁸ Other writers, who were equally read during the eighteenth century, have been rather neglected and are treated as ‘minor’ figures, and this is particularly true of women. Although eighteenth-century women did read and respond to the authors who have come to dominate academic debate, they also engaged with a wide range of other political thinkers. Hence their writing reveals what was being read and discussed by the middling sort of people; those with enough leisure to read and discuss contemporary political issues that were of interest to the general public, but who were not specialists, academics, or prelates. Some female authors, such as Eliza Haywood (1693–1756) and Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont (1711–80) were enormously prolific.⁹ Like them, the women studied here were not writing for an academic audience, but for an engaged public, of which they were a part. The debates that emerge in their writing are thus, in a sense, more typical of actual eighteenth-century preoccupations than the discussions which take place in contemporary political theory, when it takes off from a limited range of authors, who are then often read in the light of contemporary concerns.

Salon sociability has become a focus of debate among social historians during recent decades.¹⁰ Yet few studies discuss the content and arguments developed in works published by the women who participated in salons and other literary gatherings. As Hilda Smith has indicated, even feminist historians and those working in women's history have shown relatively little interest in women's intellectual contributions.¹¹ Many of the women whose ideas are outlined here, were more or less closely associated with salon culture. Some, such as Anne-Thérèse de Marguenat de Courcelles, marquise de Lambert (1647–1733), actually presided over a salon, others, such as Françoise de Graffigny (1695–1758) and Louise d'Épinay (1726–83) were encouraged to write through their involvement with a literary salon, and many participated, in some form or another, in gatherings devoted to

⁸ Jonathan Israel, *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man 1670–1752* (Oxford University Press, 2006); *A Revolution of the Mind: Radical Enlightenment and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Democracy* (Princeton University Press, 2010); *Democratic Enlightenment: Philosophy, Revolution and Human Rights* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁹ Patrick Spedding, *A Bibliography of Eliza Haywood* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2004); Catriona Seth and Jeanne Chiron (eds.), *Marie Leprince de Beaumont: De l'Éducation des filles à La Belle et la Bête* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2013), pp. 339–42.

¹⁰ Daniel Gordon, *Citizens Without Sovereignty: Equality and Sociability in French Thought, 1670–1789* (Princeton University Press, 1994); Dena Goodman, ‘Enlightenment Salons: The Convergence of Female and Philosophic Ambitions’, *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 22 (1989), 329–50.

¹¹ Hilda L. Smith, ‘Women Intellectuals and Intellectual History: Their Paradigmatic Separation’, *Women's History Review* 16 (2007), 353–68; ‘Women's History as Intellectual History: A Perspective on the *Journal of Women's History*’, *Journal of Women's History* 20 (2008), 26–32.

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literary, political, and polite conversation, around the tea-table in Germany, or at more elaborate suppers, dinners or debates organised by bluestockings in England and salonistes in France.¹² The large claims that some theorists have made for the importance of the salon in the emergence of democratic culture have been contested.¹³ And often it is vague what was actually discussed at such gatherings. Did women who assembled writers around them simply desire entertainment, as Rousseau implied was the motivation of his patroness, Louise d'Épinay, and as Antoine Lilti insinuates was generally the case? Or were they seriously interested in fostering the development of radical new ideas? Examining the content and arguments of the women's works which emerged from this milieu indicates that, indeed, while not all salons fostered democratic styles of thought, some certainly did, and that many enabled women to engage seriously with the political, social, and literary issues of their time.

Reading women's political writing also results in a challenge to certain characterisations of the progress of the Enlightenment, developed by men, who have relied almost exclusively on male authors. Jonathan Israel, for instance, claims in a review essay, in which he is promoting the importance to the Radical Enlightenment tradition of materialist thinkers from the Continent, that, 'As the eighteenth century wore on, the British, in contradistinction especially to the French materialist Enlightenment, tended to distance itself gradually from the emancipatory, egalitarian, and republican dimensions of Enlightenment thought.'¹⁴ This is a statement which completely ignores the political works of Catharine Macaulay (1731–91), who opposed the conservative writers taken by Israel to be typical of British thought; Edmund Burke (1729–97) and David Hume (1711–76), and whose influential histories and political pamphlets promoted republicanism and equality, while being grounded in seventeenth-century English writers and the intellectualist Christian tradition.¹⁵ To his credit, Israel does chide the editors of the *Encyclopaedia of the Enlightenment*, which he is reviewing, for

¹² For a description of the Reimarus 'tea-table', see Almut Marianne Grützner Spalding, *Elise Reimarus (1735–1805): The Muse of Hamburg: A Woman of the German Enlightenment* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2005), pp. 177–98.

¹³ For contemporary contestation of the intellectual significance of salons see Antoine Lilti, *Le monde des salons: Sociabilité et mondanité à Paris au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 2005); 'Sociabilité et mondanité: Les hommes de lettres dans les salons parisiens au XVIIIe siècle', *French Historical Studies* 28 (2005), 415–45.

¹⁴ Jonathan Israel, 'Enlightenment! Which Enlightenment?', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 67 (2006), 523–45 (p. 531).

¹⁵ See Karen Green, 'Will the Real Enlightenment Historian Please Stand Up? Catharine Macaulay versus David Hume', in Stephen Buckle and Craig Taylor (eds.), *Hume and the Enlightenment* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2011), pp. 29–51.

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having failed to include an entry on 'Catherine [sic] Macaulay', among many others.¹⁶ Yet, his magisterial *Democratic Enlightenment* repeats the very omission for which he chided the editors of the *Encyclopaedia*, and Macaulay's role in promoting the political ideas on which the American and French revolutions were founded is once again effaced.

Israel's omission is significant. For, as we will see, Macaulay's philosophical position belies the claim he makes in *Democratic Enlightenment* that:

All sweeping political and social reformism of a kind denying the basic legitimacy of *ancien régime* monarchism and institutions was, in principle, bound to be more logically anchored in radical metaphysics denying all teleology and divine providence than in moderate mainstream thought.¹⁷

Macaulay's histories trace the movement of reform back to the English Civil War, and to ideas of political and social reform that were founded in enthusiastic Protestantism. She, and the women she corresponded with, such as the American Sarah Prince Gill (1728–71), grounded their belief in social progress in Christianity.¹⁸ In fact, rather than Israel's assertion that a non-teleological monism implies the need for reform being true, it is more plausible to suggest that it is only against the background of an optimistic theodicy, of the kind adopted by Macaulay, that faith in the enlightened progress of humanity towards the recognition of universal rights, based in universal moral principles, can be sustained. Without teleology how can one believe in progress? Macaulay's political philosophy is radical, but her metaphysics and moral philosophy are Lockean and firmly located within the tradition that Israel deems 'moderate'.¹⁹

The works of other female enlightenment writers, who have been equally written out of intellectual history, make trouble for Israel's claims. Leprince de Beaumont's educational works emphasise autonomous critical reasoning, and the reconciliation of reason and faith, and were arguably more widely read than those of the atheist Denis Diderot (1713–84).²⁰ Her attitudes, which promoted education for women grounded in a rational faith reminiscent of Locke, were not dissimilar to those of Louise de Keralio-Robert

¹⁶ Israel, 'Enlightenment! Which Enlightenment?', p. 535.

¹⁷ Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment*, p. 20.

¹⁸ Gilder Lehrman Collection, www.gilderlehrman.org, 'Sophronia' to Catharine Macaulay, 8 December 1769, GLC01797.02.

¹⁹ Karen Green and Shanon Weekes, 'Catharine Macaulay on the Will', *European History of Ideas* 39 (2013), 409–25; Martina Reuter, 'Catharine Macaulay and Mary Wollstonecraft on the Will', in Jacqueline Broad and Karen Green (eds.), *Virtue, Liberty and Toleration: Political Ideas of European Women 1400–1800* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2007), pp. 149–70.

²⁰ Seth and Chiron, *Marie Leprince*, p. 41.

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(1758–1822), who published a revolutionary journal, and whose husband Pierre François Robert (1763–1826) was one of the first, during the revolution, to propose a republican constitution for France. Keralio-Robert's understanding of liberty looked back to Locke, and she promoted anti-racist and cosmopolitan ideas. Her political trajectory confirms the traditional account, according to which the seventeenth-century English debate was crucial in the lead-up to the French Revolution. Indeed the research into women's thought undertaken for this book suggests that Israel's overarching claim, that it is the materialists and atheists who are most important for the revolutionary tendencies within enlightenment thought, faces something of a challenge when the works of sexually egalitarian women are included in the Enlightenment. For, in general, the women whose works are covered here based their progressive politics on sincere Christian belief, and were little different in this regard from their more conservative sisters.²¹ There are some women, particularly Marie Jodin (1741–90), in France, who arguably belong to the Radical Enlightenment as characterised by Israel.²² Yet there are others, such as Gabrielle Emilie le Tonnelier de Breteuil, marquise Du Châtelet (1706–49) and Graffigny, whose conservative politics puts into question any automatic connection between a critical attitude towards the Bible, or a commitment to Spinoza's metaphysics or Helvétius's scepticism, and political radicalism.²³ It is generally the works of the men who Israel sees as contributors to the 'Moderate Enlightenment' that are taken by the women discussed here as implying a need for political change, and the adoption of universal rights.

Rather than there being two camps, one rational, monist, sceptical, tending towards atheism, tolerant, and radical; the other irrational, dualist, theist, dogmatic, and conservative, as Israel implies, there were a number of coherent ways of combining epistemological, metaphysical, and political positions.²⁴ Since the seventeenth century, sceptics who looked back to Sextus Empiricus (AD 160–210) had questioned reason's capacity to prove the existence of God and objective moral truth. The Pyrrhonian scepticism favoured by Michel de Montaigne (1533–92) had fostered the growth of

²¹ Karen Green, 'Liberty and Virtue in Catharine Macaulay's Enlightenment Philosophy', *Intellectual History Review* 22 (2012), 411–26.

²² Felicia Gordon, 'Performing Citizenship: Marie-Madeleine Jodin Enacting Diderot's and Rousseau's Dramatic and Ethical Theories', in Lisa Curtis-Wendlandt, Paul Gibbard, and Karen Green (eds.), *Political Ideas of Enlightenment Women: Virtue and Citizenship* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2013), pp. 49–62.

²³ Judith P. Zinsser, 'Emilie Du Châtelet's Views on the Pillars of French Society: King, Church, and Family', in Curtis-Wendlandt, Gibbard, and Green, *Political Ideas of Enlightenment Women*, pp. 17–31.

²⁴ Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment*, pp. 19–20.

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libertinism, though Montaigne's own view was that although custom is arbitrary, in every society individuals should follow the established law.²⁵ In Britain, sexual and religious libertinism were closely connected in the person of John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester (1647–80).²⁶ Restoration rakes defied both God and morality. The Marquis de Sade was their intellectual successor, and these examples demonstrate that, long before Dostoyevsky, some concluded that, if God is dead, everything is permitted. Conservative theists, such as Mary Astell (1666–1731), Stéphanie-Félicité Genlis (1746–1830), and Hannah More (1745–1833) agreed that atheism implied amorality, and consequently execrated atheism. Other sceptics, such as Hume, concluded that morality is subjective, and political justice an artificial invention, that promotes the long-term satisfaction of our natural desires. For that very reason, he was a political conservative, who argued that it was dangerous to dislodge established custom.²⁷

The view that reason and religion reinforced each other was the dominant view among the women studied here. Some, such as Astell and Du Châtelet, drew conservative political conclusions on this basis, but others; Catharine Cockburn (née Trotter; 1679–1749), Macaulay, Keralio-Robert, Barbauld, and Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–97) grounded their radical politics on belief in God and progress. There were tensions in their position, since, if morality can be grounded in reason, what need for revelation? Yet, without God, what reason is there to have faith in the existence of a universal morality that reason can discover? Rochester, in his famous poem 'Satyre against Reason and Mankind' had satirised reason as an '*ignis fatuus* of the mind', not the 'candle of the lord' but a misleading marsh light whose follower, 'climbs with pain, mountains of whimsies heapt in his own brain'.²⁸ Wollstonecraft very likely had his poem in mind when she declared that either men are rational, and raised by God above brute creation by their improvable capacities, or that the capacity of improvement 'is a cheat, an *ignis fatuus*, that leads us from inviting meadows into bogs and dung-hills'.²⁹ Israel's pronouncement that political and social reformism is

²⁵ Giovanni Dotoli, 'Montaigne et les libertins via Mlle de Gournay', *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 25 (1995), 381–405; Anne Hartle, 'Montaigne and Scepticism', in Ullrich Langer (ed.), *Cambridge Companion to Montaigne* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 183–206.

²⁶ Sarah Ellenzeig, 'The Faith of Unbelief: Rochester's "Satyre," Deism, and Religious Freethinking in Seventeenth-Century England', *Journal of British Studies* 44 (2005), 27–45.

²⁷ Green, 'Will the Real Enlightenment Historian Please Stand Up?'

²⁸ Harold Love (ed.), *The Works of John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester* (Oxford University Press, 1999). Quoted by Ellenzeig, 'The Faith of Unbelief', p. 34.

²⁹ Mary Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Men*, in *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, ed. Janet Todd and Marilyn Butler, 7 vols. (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1989), vol. 5, p. 14. Jacqueline

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'more logically anchored in radical metaphysics denying all teleology and divine providence than in moderate mainstream thought' fails to recognise, as Rochester had already done, that it is simply hubris for the human animal to attribute to itself a faculty of reason capable of discerning the kind of universal moral truths that ground belief in progress and moral reformation. A result of this is that Israel has completely failed to understand the challenge of post-modernism, which likewise accuses faith in reason of being on a par with faith in God.

In fact, the 'new intellectual history' advocated by Israel neglects women's writing at its peril. The aim of this new approach to intellectual history is to place texts in their social context, and to return to a view, unfashionable after the rise of Marxism and post-modernism, that ideas developed in books change society. It does this in a way that acknowledges the importance of social and economic developments and institutions, but attempts to outline the interaction between ideas and broader social factors. The old intellectual history 'can fairly be said to have been to a degree patriarchal, Eurocentric, subtly pro-imperialistic'.³⁰ Yet, up to now, the new intellectual history has been almost as patriarchal, in regard to its silence over texts written by women, as was the old intellectual history. Women's dissemination and development of enlightenment themes has been overlooked, yet, the philosophical and political issues that emerge in women's works are an excellent guide to the most common and widely debated issues of the period, since women tended to rely on easily accessible books, did not in general read Latin, or go to university, and so can be taken to be engaged with those ideas that were engaging the general literate 'public'.³¹ In France, women's literary activity emerged out of the development of salon sociability during the seventeenth century. This resulted in a model of civilised society as including appropriately educated women, and this fashion spread in turn to England and Germany. During the eighteenth century there was a revolution in women's writing, which cannot be disassociated from the revolution in manners, mores, family, and political structures that followed.³²

Broad has pointed out to me that Locke also uses this trope, but he is more concerned to cast doubt on revelations from God than on reason. See John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), IV.xix.10.

³⁰ Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*, pp. 15–16.

³¹ For the importance of women's participation in the early development of the public sphere, see Joan DeJean, *Ancients Against Moderns: Culture Wars and the Making of a Fin de Siècle* (University of Chicago Press, 1997).

³² For the revolution in women's writing, see William McCarthy, 'The Repression of Hester Lynch Piozzi: or, How We Forgot a Revolution in Authorship', *Modern Language Studies* 18 (1988), 99–111. For the theme of domesticity in the novel, see Eve Tavor Bannet, *The Domestic Revolution* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000).