OPPOSING VIEWPOINTS

Women in the Age of the Enlightenment: Rousseau and Wollstonecraft

THE "WOMAN'S QUESTION"—THE DEBATE ABOUT the nature and value of women—continued to be discussed in the eighteenth century. In *Émile*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau reflected the view of many male thinkers when he argued that there were natural biological differences between men and women that made women mothers rather than intellectuals. Some women thinkers, however, presented new perspectives.

Mary Wollstonecraft responded to an unhappy childhood in a large family by seeking to lead an independent life. Few occupations were available for middle-class women in her day, but she survived by working as a teacher, chaperone, and governess to aristocratic children. All the while, she wrote and developed her ideas on the rights of women. The selection below is taken from her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, the work that won her a reputation as the foremost British feminist thinker of the eighteenth century.

Rousseau, *Émile* (1762)

It follows that woman is made specially to please men. If man ought to please her in turn, it is due to a less direct necessity. His merit is in his power; he pleases by the sole fact of his strength. . . .

The strictness of the relative duties of the two sexes is not and cannot be the same. When woman complains on this score about unjust man-made inequality, she is wrong. This inequality is not a human institution—or, at least, it is the work not of prejudice but of reason. It is up to the sex that nature has charged with the bearing of children to be responsible for them to the other sex. Doubtless it is not permitted to anyone to violate his faith, and every unfaithful husband who deprives his wife of the only reward of the austere duties of sex is an unjust and barbarous man. But the unfaithful woman does more; she dissolves the family and breaks all the bonds of nature. . . .

The good constitution of children initially depends on that of their mothers. The first education of men depends on the care of women. . . . Thus, the whole education of women ought to relate to men. To please men, to be useful to them, to make herself loved and honored by them, to raise them when young, to care for them when grown, to counsel them, to console them, to make their lives agreeable and sweet—these are the duties of women at all times, and they ought to be taught from childhood. . . .

The quest for abstract and speculative truths, principles, and axioms in the sciences, for everything that tends to generalize ideas, is not within the competence of women. All their studies ought to be related to practice. . . . Nor do women have sufficient precision and attention to succeed at the exact sciences. And as for the physical sciences, they are for the sex which is more active, gets around more, and sees more objects, the sex which has more strength and uses it more to judge the relations of sensible beings and the laws of nature. Woman, who is weak and who sees nothing outside the house, estimates and judges the forces she can put to work to make up for her weakness.

Mary Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792)

It is a melancholy truth—yet such is the blessed effect of civilization—the most respectable women are the most oppressed; and, unless they have understandings far superior to the common run of understandings, taking in both sexes, they must, from being treated like contemptible beings, become contemptible. How many women thus waste life away the prey of discontent, who might have practiced as physicians, regulated a farm, managed a shop, and stood erect, supported by their own industry, instead of hanging their heads surcharged with the dew of sensibility, that consumes the beauty to which it at first gave luster. . . .

Proud of their weakness, however, [women] must always be protected, guarded from care, and all the rough toils that dignify the mind. If this be the fiat of fate, if they will make themselves insignificant and contemptible, sweetly to waste "life away," let them not expect to be valued when their beauty fades, for it is the fate of the fairest flowers to be admired and pulled to pieces by the careless hand that plucked them. In how many ways do I wish, from the purest benevolence, to impress this truth on my sex; yet I fear that they will not listen to a truth that dear-bought experience has brought home to many an agitated bosom, nor willingly resign the privileges of rank and sex for the privileges of humanity, to which those have no claim who do not discharge its duties. . . .

Would men but generously snap our chains, and be content with the rational fellowship instead of slavish obedience, they would find us more observant daughters, more affectionate sisters, more faithful wives, and more reasonable mothers—in a word, better citizens. We should then love them with true affection, because we should learn to respect ourselves; and the peace of mind of a worthy man would not be interrupted by the idle vanity of his wife.

Q *What did Rousseau believe was the role of women, and how did he think they should be educated? What arguments did Mary Wollstonecraft make on behalf of the rights of women? What picture did she paint of the women of her day? Why did Wollstonecraft suggest that both women and men were at fault for the "slavish" situation of women?*

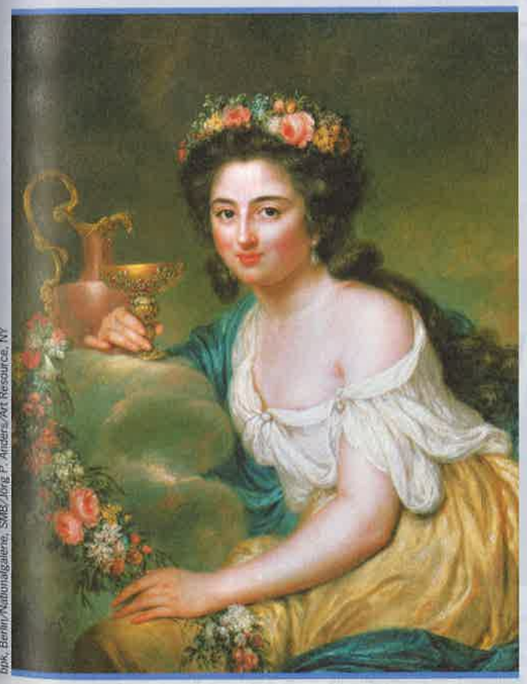
Sources: Rousseau, *Émile* (1762). Copyright © 1979 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Michael Wu. Mary Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). From Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792).

IMAGES OF EVERYDAY LIFE

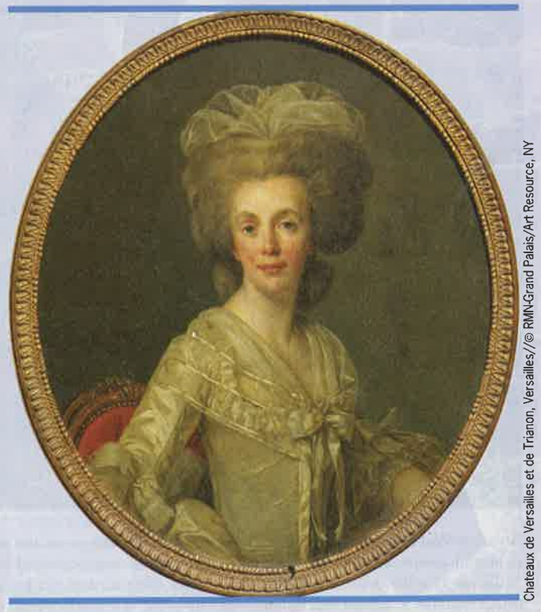
Women and the Enlightenment Salon

Chateaux de Malmaison et Bois-Preau (Daniel Arnaudet)/© RMN-Grand Palais/Art Resource, NY

AS HOSTESSES OF SALONS, WOMEN PLAYED a pivotal role in the spread of Enlightenment ideas by providing a place where philosophes could meet and discuss the topics of the day. Salons also offered women access to intellectual stimulus that was generally otherwise denied to them. Throughout Europe, women were barred from any other higher educational opportunities. A hostess of a salon not only provided food and a drawing room where the guests could mingle, but also set the agenda for the evening and dictated the guest list. Two of the most prominent Parisian hostesses were Madame Geoffrin and Madame Necker (neh-KAIR). In the painting on the left, Madame Geoffrin is seen (third on the right) in her salon surrounded by philosophes in her home on the rue Saint-Honoré. Her salon was highly popular, with nobles, writers, artists, and financiers in regular attendance. Suzanne Necker, seen in the portrait at the lower right, was the wife of financier Jacques Necker and spent her days preparing for the evening discussions by reading and writing in her journal. Although the Parisian salons were the most famous, by the late eighteenth century, hostesses in Vienna and Berlin were also holding prominent salons. The painting at the lower left depicts Henriette Herz, whose father was the first Jewish physician to practice in Berlin. Herz was one of many notable wealthy women from Jewish families who sponsored salons in Berlin and Vienna.



bpk, Berlin/Nationalgalerie, SMB/Jörg P. Anders/Art Resource, NY



Chateaux de Versailles et de Trianon, Versailles/© RMN-Grand Palais/Art Resource, NY