“WOMEN WITH A CAUSE”: ART, REPRESENTATION, AND FEMINIST PROGRESS IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY FRANCE

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ABSTRACT

“Women with a Cause”: Art, Representation, and Feminist Progress in Eighteenth-Century France

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Throughout the eighteenth century the Age of Enlightenment transformed public discourse across Western Europe. In France, the salons of Paris became the primary institutions of Enlightenment thought. Hosted by women, the salons possessed a unique atmosphere in which men and women were regarded as intellectual equals. My thesis focuses on the role the female hostesses, salonnières, had in initiating French movements for gender equality that continued with great momentum throughout the French Revolution. By using popular artwork, literature, and memoirs I show how the efforts of French women to achieve gender equality helped give early rise to feminism.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

Paris in the mid-eighteenth century was undergoing reformation which gave rise to an institution for the progress of French society. During France’s Age of Enlightenment, the salon became the designated center for intellectual and cultural developments. Perhaps the most shocking disclosure of France’s Enlightenment would be the role of women within the salons. One might expect to find these clubs exclusive to upper-class white men; however, despite this description fitting the majority of attendants, it was women who led the gatherings and debates that proliferated beyond the walls of the salon. Salonnières were women of many talents, selected to host participants and direct conversation among the many philosophes who congregated to discuss art, literature, and politics. The role afforded to the women within the salon broke free from traditional gender roles, providing not only a place to escape the confines of domestic servitude typically allotted to women during this time, but also a space in which they could partake as intellectual equals.

The culture of the Enlightenment altered the reality of eighteenth-century Europe, for it was the first time in Western history in which people sought after acquired knowledge to explain the world around them, rather than using the Bible as the sole source of understanding. Despite the available opportunities for people to learn to read, self-educate, and contribute to the expanding knowledge of the Enlightenment, upper-class men and women who were able to afford the tutors and literature that provided them the proficiency to contribute to the learned culture. As the Enlightenment progressed, it
gave rise to an exclusive culture of intellectuals who were reading the same texts, exposed to the same art, and corresponding with one another about their opinions of the knowledge they consumed. The people included within this learned society of France are otherwise known as philosophes, the intellectual elites of the Enlightenment. One of the largest institutional results of the learned society formed during the Enlightenment was the physical space to gather and discuss that took shape in Paris as the salon.

Although this new public role provided women the space to be vocal and gain recognition within the salon as intellectual equals amongst male counterparts, the experience learned men had with educated women produced a paranoia that all women would soon follow the lead of salonnières and abandon their traditional gender roles to subscribe to a life outside the home. As a result of this paranoia, the same “enlightened” men who had helped give rise to the culture that supported the salonnières actively worked to ensure women would return and remain within their idealized patriarchal framework. By using the science of sexual difference and publishing explicit texts against the equality of women, men considered to be some of the greatest male minds of the eighteenth century led the rally to return public women to their private sphere.

However, it was not only men who believed sexual difference to be the leading scientific explanation for their biological distinctions, women who adhered to the knowledge of the time also believed in these theories. The demeaning texts written about female inferiority by France’s philosophes had a lasting impact upon French women’s understanding of their role within society. The trust women of the French Enlightenment placed in the science of sexual difference gave rise to the uniquely paradoxical environment of eighteenth-century France in which women entered the public sphere and
accomplished achievements for women that had never been done before while simultaneously believing they were biologically inferior to men. These paradoxes, best addressed by historians Joan Scott and Joan Landes, were frequently utilized by “enlightened” men to repel women from non-traditional gender roles.¹ Despite the impact of sexual difference within learned society and contemporary Enlightenment literature, public women made a significant contribution to the world around them.²

Eighteenth-century women who had the privilege to learn to read and write utilized their newly acquired skills in almost all art media. Epistolary literature became a primary tool for women to lay out their thoughts, form a sense of self-identity in a world that contradicted concepts of gender, and manifest their creativity. Women writers produced the same paranoia that arose from fear of breaking with non-traditional gender roles. In spite of the efforts and numerous publications made by France’s leading intellectual men to convince women of their inferiority and naturally designed roles as wives and mothers living behind closed doors, the women of France’s salons remained persistent in their quest for equality long through the nation’s great revolution.

Through self-education and the courage to take on non-traditional public roles, the women of France’s salons influenced the culture of their era and the generations after them. Furthermore, the influence of the salonnières was not limited to the participants in attendance of the salons, their sway extended through cultural institutions such as The French Royal Academy of Art. By holding a dominant role in the public eye, among France’s most educated and influential people, the salonnières helped shaped the art and

literature of the Enlightenment and French Revolution while simultaneously helping pave the way for early feminism in France.³ It is to these strong-willed, educated women that not only French, but international feminists owe our utmost gratitude. Through their tenacity and willingness to tackle the patriarchy when provided an opportunity of influence, women of generations following the salonnieres have been capable of following avenues of success that were paved by the extraordinary women of eighteenth-century France who fought tirelessly for fundamental human rights that all women should justly be rewarded.⁴

Using letters and autobiographies of France’s most memorable salonnieres, this thesis examines the role these highly intelligent women played as influencers of society. Furthermore, I will address the ways in which these women used their platform to bring forward their concerns for equality in the face of revolution. At the peak of salon culture, a salonne was treated as an intellectual equal to those who gathered in her salon. She contributed to the fight for gender equality by facilitating thoughtful conversation and debate surrounding the work of others or work of her own. However, as argued by leading French Enlightenment historian, Dena Goodman, the privileged role the salonnieres once held did not last forever.⁵ In this work I will reveal the ways these women broke ground for French feminism and gender equality but through the chaos of revolution lost their public positions and were relegated once again to the private sphere, restored to traditional domestic roles.

Many of the most prominent historians who focus on the gendered history of the Salons and France’s great revolution are women, including: Dena Goodman, Lisa Beckstrand, Joan Landes, Lynn Hunt, and Joan Scott. Another historian who has offered a significant contribution to the scholarship on women’s roles in the salons and the French Revolution is Steven Kale of Washington State University. These authors have developed the field to an exceptional level, using the journals and writing of many of the salonnières themselves to provide a rich history of the intellectual movement and the ways it impacted the society around them.

Among the most prominent historians of women in the French Enlightenment Era throughout the revolution is Joan Landes. In her work *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution*, she discusses the ways in which women of the salons, participating in France’s aristocratic world, held highly public roles. In many ways, the public roles of women serving as salonnières did not dramatically differ from the role men played in the intellectual scene. However, Landes argues, the women of the bourgeois differed from those involved in the aristocratic arena as they continued to deal with sharp distinctions drawn between men and women’s roles. Soon, as the expectations of what defined feminine behavior evolved, many men from the bourgeoisie spoke out about their disdain for the new “public woman,” who according to them possessed an undesired femininity that plagued the female aristocrats of France.\(^6\) As a result, republican and liberal political thought linked its rejection of the aristocracy with a call for the domestication of women and their return to the private sphere.\(^7\) Landes argues

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\(^7\) Ibid., 36.
throughout her book that feminism was one of the outcomes of the demand to relegate women back to the privacy of their homes. This force erupted from French women in opposition to the bourgeoisie’s call for domesticity.8

Landes goes on to demonstrate the complexity of this early feminist movement as she shows that the arguments for equality made by women were not always so straightforward. Landes situates the reader in the historical context in which the leading science, focused on the difference of sexuality in men and women prevailed throughout most intellectual discourses. Thus, the teachings and rhetoric of sexual difference were so embedded into both men’s and women’s notions of their natural bodies that feminists became tangled in contradictions concerning whether their physical divergences had any implications for their right to political liberties.9

Another leader in gender history, Joan Scott, follows a similar line of argument as Joan Landes. Scott contributes one of most significant works to women’s history of the French enlightenment in her book Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man. The word “paradox” in the title of this book is taken from French feminist and writer Olympe de Gouges. De Gouges spent many years in the French Revolution campaigning for women’s rights to full citizenship. De Gouges’ feminism produced its own paradox insofar as her distinction in the differences of men and women. She insisted women were sexual, reproductive, and imaginative beings whose qualities deserved inclusion in the criteria for citizenship.10

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8 Ibid., 47.
9 Ibid., 52.
10 Scott, Only Paradoxes to Offer, 7.
Scott argues that the paradox of feminism lays at the center of republican politics: feminists who protested women’s exclusion from political rights found themselves simultaneously denying and affirming sexual difference.11 Following along the same line of inquiry posed by Joan Landes, Scott asserts: “feminism is not a reaction to republicanism, but one of its effects… Feminist agency is constituted by this paradox.”12 Here Scott uses De Gouges to demonstrate the paradox that plagued many French feminists who undermined their argument even as they attempted to challenge the dominant beliefs of the society.

In many ways both Joan Landes and Joan Scott bring awareness to the same issue. Although their methodology differs, they each come to the conclusion that the efforts for equality posed by French feminists of the Enlightenment era were highly contradictory as they demanded rights while also emphasizing the natural differences they had from men that they believed might make them ill fit for a role in their state’s politics. This is one of the trends that categorizes the historiography of women’s history in the salons of Paris and their position in the French Revolution. This approach to the history of the public role of women before and throughout the French revolution allows the reader a better understanding of the nuances and perplexities that categorized this radical time period which in turn impacted the ambitions of women’s rights movements.

Another common theme in the historiography of women in the Enlightenment salons is the emphasis on women’s role in the public as salonnières and the societal reactions to this dramatic change in long held gender norms. Dena Goodman is one such historian to unpack this complicated narrative. Her research focuses on the women’s rise

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11 Ibid., 11.
12 Ibid., 168.
in the intellectual world, their contributions to the Enlightenment, and the ways in which the patriarchal structure of France’s Old Regime influenced even the most progressive of men to support the return of women into the private sphere. Goodman’s book *Becoming a Woman in the Age of Letters* not only discusses the role of women in the prestigious Republic of Letters but also incorporates the art of the time to display the significance of women being depicted as writers in Enlightenment era portraits. Goodman reveals to the reader the importance of a literate woman with the ability to write and argues that writing letters to loved ones and family became a tool for women to utilize and improve their education through.\(^\text{13}\)

In other works, such as her article “Enlightenment Salons: The Convergence of Female and Philosophic Ambitions,” Goodman argues women lost their role as salonnières when influential men of the time began to feel threatened by women in positions of power. This is what, Goodman argues, led these same men to configure the Republic of Letters which excluded the participation of women.\(^\text{14}\) In contrast to the argument made by Dena Goodman, Steven Kale argues that women managed to hold political sway and position within the public, albeit in less official manner, throughout the French Revolution and Napoleonic era.

In his book, *French Salons: High Society and Political Sociability from the Old Regime to the Revolution of 1848*, Steven Kale fights back against the widely argued notion that women serving as salonnières held authoritative positions or held any sway over the men they interacted with in salons. Kale concurs with Adeline Daumard's


repudiation of salonnières as political. Daumard states that "women of the highest society and the best circles at court did not have...the power either to make the careers of a man they honored or to determine public affairs by friends interposed."\textsuperscript{15} Kale is unconvinced by arguments made by Joan Landes and Dena Goodman and looks to debunk women’s power within the salon as an “optical illusion.”\textsuperscript{16} Kale’s methodology follows an institutional premise as it charts the beginnings of salons and the ways the salon developed and changed from its start to the mid-nineteenth century, concluding with his assertion that salonnières did not possess the power they are portrayed to have within recent scholarship. Kale declares that “the salon was neither a feminist institution nor logically pointed toward the goals of modern feminism.”\textsuperscript{17}

Pushing against the argument of Kale while expanding further upon the methods utilized by historians such as Joan Scott, Joan Landes, and Dena Goodman, historian Lynn Hunt insists that France was far more than an initial hotspot for concepts of gender equality. Hunt takes a much broader stance, contending that the era of Enlightenment and the concepts of human rights that erupted from the intellectual movement originated in France.\textsuperscript{18} Furthermore, Hunt proclaims that if it were not for the universalism of the Enlightenment era and the progressive concepts that erupted from citizens’ disapproval of absolutism under the Old Regime, “there would have been no concept of human rights in the West.”\textsuperscript{19} Hunt’s argument, although highly contested, highlights the dramatic impact

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 40.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 221.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 4.
the concepts coming out of the Enlightenment and French Revolution had upon the rest of the world. As demonstrated in Haiti’s Revolution, it was clear that the rhetoric of liberty and justice was expanding far beyond Paris. Hunt’s argument, therefore, serves to illustrate how the progressive notions embedded in France’s Enlightenment culture created a ricochet effect that shot a revolutionary spirit and with it, reformist thinking throughout the Western world. Here, I will examine the contributions made to this enlightened culture by salonnières and trace how their efforts offered approaches for gender equality to women across the continent.

Throughout this work I refer to the salonnières and women who participated in the revolution as feminists and their work as serving a feminist agenda. My periodization of this term is a bit sooner than most scholars would argue as the origin of the word “feminist” itself traces back to France only as far as the late nineteenth century.20 The concept of feminism is astonishingly complex, as Susan Kent addresses in her essay “Worlds of Feminism;” feminism can be redefined based on context and circumstances. Kent acknowledges the events surrounding the French revolution as contributing to the rise of French feminism as French women publicly objected to their exclusion from political rights promised to men in the Declaration of Rights of Men and of the Citizen. Although active in overthrowing the Old Regime women continued to be excluded from possessing the rights granted to men, Kent argues that “the contradiction created by giving women civil agency while denying their existence as political actors helped produce feminism in France.”21

20 Claire Goldberg Moses, “‘What’s in a Name?’ On Writing the History of Feminism,” Feminist Studies 38, no. 3 (2012): 757-79.
Lisa Moore and Joanna Brooks, scholars of feminist theory, define feminism broadly in their book *Transatlantic Feminisms in the Age of Revolutions*. They define feminism as “consciousness of and opposition to sex- and gender- related oppression.”²² Using this inclusive definition Moore and Brooks propose a different periodization for the origins of feminism as they recognize feminist ideas and writing circulating in Europe as early as the fifteenth-century.²³ In discussing the revolution in France, Moore and Brooks refer to female revolutionaries as French feminists due to their efforts to correct their omission from the *Declaration of Rights of Man and of the Citizen*. The undertaking by French women throughout the Age of Enlightenment and the French Revolution can be recognized as feminism as they strove to achieve gender equality under the law and within public society.

I would argue that the seeds of feminism in France had already been planted prior to the achievement of women’s civil liberties. The efforts of the salonnières to obtain a place within the public sphere demonstrates French women’s early endeavors in the fight for gender equality. In her article “The Paradoxical Origins of Human Rights,” Lynn Hunt discusses how the concept of human rights predates the rhetorical phrase “human rights” made popular in the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights written in 1948. Hunt argues that despite the lack of terminology or circulation of the expression “human rights” strives were made by people around the world towards achieving such liberties like civil, natural, property, and bodily rights.²⁴ Yet, it wasn’t until the mid-twentieth century that the phrase “human rights” became apart of the

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²³ Ibid.
common vernacular.\textsuperscript{25} Similarly, the concepts that came to define the word “feminism” also predated the word’s origin. Feminism is “the advocacy of women’s rights on the basis of the equality of the sexes” as defined by the \textit{Oxford Dictionaries}.\textsuperscript{26} Advocating for women’s rights in order to bring about gender equality is precisely what salonnières and France’s women revolutionaries were working to achieve. For this reason I have chosen to include the phrase feminism in reference to the work both salonnières and women of France’s peasantry strove to accomplish during the Age of Enlightenment and throughout the revolution. Based on the definition of feminism, the actions and writings of the salonnières and female revolutionaries of France can most certainly be identified as feminist although the term “feminism” itself had yet to be utilized.

Chapter two will discuss the role of women in the Age of Enlightenment, focusing primarily on the importance of letter writing as a demonstration of education and ambition while simultaneously unpacking the ways men of the Enlightenment worked to keep women relegated in the private sphere.

Chapter three centers around the salonnières of Paris and their unique position within the public sphere. In this chapter I will explain how the salonnières’ role influenced the art of the eighteenth-century and therefore France’s broader society. By exposing peoples of all backgrounds to the intellectual capabilities of women, salonnières helped bring rise to notions of gender equality that were expanded into feminist action throughout the revolution.

In chapter four I will address the role of French women throughout the revolution, how they participated and how their efforts were portrayed in popular artwork and

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 20.

newspaper lithographs. By navigating the strides French women made throughout the eighteenth century this thesis will shed light on the feminist progress salonnières and female revolutionaries strove to achieve and the importance of female representation in art and literature during the Age of Enlightenment.

Through their strength and bravery, the women of France’s salons demonstrated the potential for women to participate as intellectuals and contribute to the educational culture of the Enlightenment while also remaining strong willed in the face of revolution. Their achievements have paved the way for women generations after them to continue their legacy in the fight for gender equality in academics, politics, and society as a whole. The salonnières of the French Enlightenment paved the way for women’s larger role in the public sphere by providing women the opportunity to participate in egalitarian conversation of art and politics. Nevertheless, the threat these women posed to conventional gender norms and traditional ways of life led to societal push for their relegation to the private sphere. Throughout the eighteenth-century French women utilized their unique position as salonnières to advocate for gender equality and when revolution erupted in 1789, women of the salons and France’s peasantry alike united their efforts as they devoted themselves to the cause of the revolution and feminism.
Chapter 2

French Women and the Enlightenment

The Age of Enlightenment was a revolutionary period in the history of early modern Europe. With it came a mass movement inclined towards the intellectual and philosophical prosperity of the people. It included a wide range of radical concepts regarding reason, progress, tolerance, and the separation of church and state. In France, the primary doctrines of the Enlightenment philosophers were centered on concepts of individual liberty and religious tolerance, in opposition to the absolute monarchy and the fixed dogmas of the Roman Catholic Church. The ideas of the Enlightenment undermined the authority of the French monarchy and the Church as it brought to light notions of liberty, justice, and equality, which were not the reality of Louis XVI’s absolutist monarchy. As a result, the Enlightenment culture helped pave the way for the political revolution that would erupt in 1789 as French citizens sought to overturn their monarchical government in favor of an institution that valued the ideals the enlightened age of ideas produced.\(^\text{27}\)

The hope for equality produced by the Enlightenment did create a sense of optimism for many French citizens. As Louis XVI and his foreign bride, Marie Antoinette, lived outlandishly in their Versailles palace tucked away from the reality of the extreme poverty French peasants were living in, much of French society was fostering resentment toward their King.\(^\text{28}\) When exposed to the concepts raised by the Enlightenment, poor French peasants in Paris, where Enlightenment theories flourished, hoped for the possibility of a brighter future, one in which the government would express


\(^{28}\) Timothy Tackett, *When the King took Flight* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 32.
concern for the general welfare of its people. Still, in the countryside where many remained illiterate and therefore unexposed to the idea of the separation of church and state, the people believed in Louis XVI’s divine right to the throne and put their faith, above all else, in his authority. The faith of the people did not remain in Louis XVI as the course of the Enlightenment ensued and swept across France and most of Western Europe. However, it did take time for these radical ideals to disseminate and take hold in the rural regions of France. Nevertheless, in Paris the city that is commonly referred to by many historians as the capital of the Enlightenment, men and women alike acted upon their profound new theories to create an atmosphere that thrived on intellectual exchanges surrounding art, literature, and politics.  

Despite the purported ideas of equality that arose from the Enlightenment and brought to reality new opportunities for women outside of traditional gender roles, France’s long-standing patriarchy was not toppled overnight. For French women seeking freedom from the customary narrative of marriage, motherhood, and a life dedicated to domesticity it became necessary to take whatever opportunity they were given to demonstrate to the world around them what they were capable of achieving. In education and literacy women still faced a severe disadvantage compared to that of men. Even so, French women that were privileged enough to learn to read and write pushed the boundaries of what was considered the right way of life for a woman. Despite the pre-existing patriarchal challenges facing French women of the Enlightenment, these resilient women utilized their literacy and power of the pen to redefine concepts of womanhood that would leave a lasting impact for gender equality in early modern Europe.  

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Women and Enlightenment Education

Amongst the most noteworthy improvements in women’s lives as a result of the Enlightenment and the purported ideas the culture of the intellectual movement manifested was the opportunity to read and write. In Paris, where philosophes crowded cafés to write literature of their own and exchange thoughts on the popular novels, letters, and texts of the moment, women had access to the most celebrated literary works in all of Europe. For the first time in history, women had access to the same sources as men.31

Of course, once having learned to read and write women were equipped with the tools necessary to further their education and become knowledgeable in all subjects they wish to understand. However, girls were not provided with the same formal education that was allotted to men of the time. For a young girl in the eighteenth-century to receive and education, her family must have been wealthy enough to afford her one. This typically meant sending their young daughter to be tutored through the Church or in some instances allocating funds to a private tutor or pedagogue to teach her the skills of reason.32 Despite the role many scholars took on as personal educators of women, most maintained misogynistic ideas of women and their place within learned society.

One of the eighteenth century’s most famous pedagogues, Jean-Jacques Rousseau demonstrates the sentiments that clouded the minds of the Enlightenment’s men in a particularly poor inquiry found in his philosophical treatise questioning the relationship between the individual and society entitled Émile, or On Education: “Et depuis quand sont-ce les hommes qui se mêlent de l’éducation des filles? Qui est-ce qui empêche les

mères de les élever comme il leur plait?” [What have men to do with the education of girls? What is there to hinder their mothers educating them as they please?]. 33 At the same time Rosseau stated, “L’art de penser n’est pas étranger aux femmes, mais elles ne doivent faire qu’effleurer les sciences de raisonnement.” [The art of thinking is not foreign to women, but they should only skim the surface of the sciences of reasoning]. 34 Rosseau’s questions concerning women receiving an education reveals the ways in which learned men sought to keep in their domestic roles. First, his query concerning why men should take any effort in helping share their formal educations which were not permitted for women at this time, he asserts that any education a female receives should come from their mothers. In this sense, Rosseau hints at what he believes is a natural role for a woman: to learn the domestic skills her mother practices and follow a cycle of womanhood that revolves solely around the home and the family. By underlining the continuity between woman's procreative function and her social role as wife, and mother Rousseau subtly shifts from the physical to the psychological, from the natural to the social, which he presents as mutually reinforcing and mutually justifying. According to Rosseau and many of the philosophes, the anatomy of women served to distinguish them from men and to define their primary role and destiny, which, in their view, is to remain submissive and care for the young so to assure the survival of the species. Rosseau invokes this natural teleology in his treatise on scholarship both to restrict the role and education of women and to explain their inequality.” 35

34 Ibid.
Although being perpetually reminded by society’s most educated men of their differences, the women of France’s Enlightenment remained persistent in their interests outside of domesticity. For these women, life closed within the home was not appealing as it limited them from experiencing art, literature, and social occasions to discuss politics and the like. The concept of freedom and the draw of finally having an opportunity to partake within society motivated French women to take advantage of what life had to offer aside from motherhood. Finally, French women were permitted to take part in the things their fathers, husbands, and brothers had always had access to. And once they had a taste of how exciting life could be outside of the home, these women were not ready to give it all up despite what any man had to say about it. Therefore, as women began participating within France’s “enlightened” society, they provoked philosophical discourses amongst men of learned society to focus on what was the right role for a natural woman versus a social woman.  

One of the central issues in eighteenth-century France revolves around definitions of nature and of culture. Debates proliferated over the respective rights of each and the most favored constructions between the two. The “social woman” was the term ascribed to women of the public, those who had an interest in being a part of society. Social women were radical due to the fact that women had never taken on such roles before. Suddenly, France was a place in which a woman was powerful. She was literate and had access to the world’s most acclaimed written works, she attended social gatherings either in the salon or an evening party, and she had opinions to share on the politics of the day. The moment that the “social woman” began to establish that she was capable of

assimilating into the world of France’s aristocracy, she became a threat to the patriarchal order that kept men at the top of French society. Almost as quickly as women entered the public realm, men had something to say in opposition of their actions. “Social woman as the flagrant sign of the regnant culture, will be viewed by her most savage male critics as a triumph of cultural artifice, of appearance, as dazzling surface at best, as morally grotesque at worst.” The social woman was seen as a contradiction of everything the natural woman possessed. The “natural woman” became an ideal written about by men of the Enlightenment. In contrast to the social woman, the natural woman was viewed as the moral compass of society. She was the nurturing female that was primarily concerned with caring for her husband and family. Her interests may have included reading and writing at this time but for the philosophes of France, it was important that women remain dedicated to their “natural” position within society which meant remaining within the private realm. Contradictions reaped their way through France’s learned society of the eighteenth-century as purported concepts of individual liberties and rights permeated the minds of women. However, once women took part in activities outside of the conventional domestic chores that were traditionally carried out by females, the philosophes immediately initiated discussion over the unnaturalness for a woman to read, write, and work like a man.

**Women Writers**

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37 Spencer, *French Women and the Age of Enlightenment*, 56.
Imagine yourself in a distinguished library reading room. Before you lies a volume of Denis Diderot and Jean Le Rond d’Alembert’s *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, perhaps the best-known monument to Enlightenment thought. It is a text that is both impressive in weight and dimension, bound in leather with detailed lettering on its spine. The luxury of the binding befits the book’s significant status as the most famous work of the Enlightenment. You open the book to find a frontispiece, a depiction of all spheres of knowledge represented by humans.

Engraved by Bonaventure-Louis Prévost in 1772, the Frontispiece of the *Encyclopédie* (Figure 1) was based on an original sketch by Charles-Nicolas Cochin exhibited at the Louvre in the Salon of 1765. The engraving featured just inside the binding of the *Encyclopédie* stands as an allegorical representation of the trinity of intelligence: imagination, reason, and memory. Accompanying the engraving is an explication written by Diderot:

> “Beneath a Temple of Ionic Architecture, Sanctuary of Truth, we see Truth wrapped in a veil, radiating a light that parts the clouds and disperses them. To the right of Truth, Reason and Philosophy are occupied, the one in lighting the veil from Truth, the other in pulling it away.”

At the top of the image appears Imagination approaching Truth with a garland and crown; Memory is located to the right of reason. The frontispiece engraving depicts the various arts and sciences that materialize from the trinity of faculties. Beneath memory, history can be found. Beneath imagination one will find literary genres and fine arts. And beneath the crowned representation of reason, there is philosophy.

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40 Denis Diderot, John Lough, and Jacques Proust, eds., *Encyclopédie; ou Dictionnaire Raisonné des Sciences, des Arts et des Métiers* (Œuvres Complètes; Paris: Chez Briasson, David L’aîné, 1765).
The feature of the frontispiece that grabs particular attention is that all the allegorical figures, including Reason, are female. If one were to determine the Encyclopédie’s views on women based on viewing the frontispiece alone, one might conclude that it acknowledges some type of feminine paradise, an intellectual domain where women are regarded as superior leaders. Yet despite this allegorical representation in which female figures are exhibited as portraying the trinity of knowledge, the engraved image stands in stark contrast to the opposition between women and reason made explicit by the writers of text. Encyclopédie articles such as “Femme” and “Raissonable” reveal the popular sentiments amongst eighteenth-century men in regard to woman and reason and women’s participation in literature and arts.

In “Femme,” Desmahis writes: “The two sexes have almost equal advantages. To one, nature gave strength and majesty, courage and reason; to the other, graces and beauty, delicacy and sentiment.” This definition reflects the emerging eighteenth-century notion of differences made distinct by an individual’s sex. In Desmahis’s view, women and reason are opposed. This is especially ironic in an age that declared allegiance to universal equality.

Nevertheless, women’s perceived deficiencies heavily impacted the lives of women eager to have a place within the intellectual world of Enlightenment France. The attitudes about women held by France’s philosophes were not original in any sense. In fact, they mainly restated and reinforced ideas inherited from the tradition of prescribed gender norms. In spite of the Age of Enlightenment’s theories on justice and equality

Figure 1. *Encyclopédie* Frontispiece, Bonaventure-Louis Prevost (1772)
women’s inferior raison was considered tightly connected to their raison d’être, or purpose for existence. Therefore, this concept permeated almost every domain of eighteenth-century life: education, marriage and law, morality, and access to public discourse.\(^{43}\) Thus, when women took part in the popular practice of letter correspondences or story writing, the men of the Enlightenment one again found a creative way to disregard the reason they believed women lacked.

The power of the pen knows no bounds. Writing as an intellectual practice can make it possible to traverse the cultural boundaries between private and public and the physical distance marked by absence. For this and many other reasons, letter writing became the primary form of communication in the eighteenth-century. The Enlightenment’s encouragement of learning and philosophy brought the skills of reading and writing to people whom had never had such privileges before, including women. The letter became a manifestation of intellect, the material culture of epistolary became the extension and incorporation of the mind. In eighteenth-century France, letter writing spread European culture to the four corners of the world and brought back cultures of the world to enrich the culture of Paris, France, and Europe. In this context, the letter-writing woman was a modern woman and because there was no tradition of female epistolary, the practice letter writing compelled her to enter the new arena in which she could discover the tools she required to speak her mind.\(^{44}\)

By the time that women finally acquired the skills and resources necessary to participate in letter writing, men had been writing for years. In art and literature, men

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\(^{44}\) Goodman, *Becoming a Woman in the Age of Letters*, 9.
were frequently posed as academics by positioning letters within their portraited
depiction. For women, letter writing was not simply a form of recreation or an alternative
to published writing; it was the crucial step to developing an awareness of themselves as
gendered subjects in the modern world. But women writers threatened the status quo of
men as the sole possessors of the pen, which brought eighteenth-century men to reinforce
gender stereotypes by representing women letter-writers as smitten girls love struck by a
man who becomes, in an image, the only writer. Thus, women as the recipient of love
letters consumed epistolary culture. As opinions became reflected within the cultural
manifestations of French society, the beliefs maintained by men of letters are no better
demonstrated than in the portrayal of women in eighteenth-century genre painting.

Women, Letters, and Portraiture

Painting and portraiture of the eighteenth century provides a first-hand glimpse
into the life of Enlightenment-era France. Each depiction reveals to us an aspect of the
contemporary culture: a cause to be passionate for, a person of an esteemed position, or
even just the activities the people of France would fill their days with. As a result,
paintings have become one of the primary examples for understanding the cultural
practices and beliefs of the past. In the paintings of eighteenth-century France, it becomes
clear to the audience the importance of letter writing based on the overwhelming supply
of images dedicated to the portraying epistolary practice. If one were to believe the
painters of France’s Enlightenment, one might assume that in the eighteenth-century
women read letters, but they did not write them, and the letters they did ready were
almost entirely about love. This is due to the fact that male artists who developed the

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letter theme in genre painting used their work to portray the ideal “epistolary woman”
they imagined. In doing so, they turned a female cultural practice into a trope of male
love and desire. Instead of demonstrating women’s autonomy through writing, the letters
that fill these paintings serve to remind the audience of the missing person: the male
whose affection is the central focus of the woman within the image.

Take for example Fragonard’s The Love Letter, (Figure 2) we see a young woman
with a small dog perched behind her. In her arms we see a bouquet of flowers
accompanied by a small letter. The woman leans forward as if to smell the flowers and
her sideways gaze informs the audience that she is surprised, that this in fact was not a
planned portrait. At her desk there lie notes but instead of bringing her attention to those
papers she fixes her attention steadily upon the love letter she has received. The love
letter here serves to demonstrate to the audience the role of a mysterious man whose
words obviously become the woman’s priority as she abandons the work she has left
behind on her desk.

Despite lacking his physical presence within the image, by making the love letter
our subject’s key interest Fragonard has placed the role of the male lover at the center of
this image’s story. In doing so, Fragonard perpetuates the gender stereotype that women
are highly emotional creatures and although they possess the same abilities to read and
write as men, their focus of these abilities has become entirely intertwined with their
romantic behaviors.
Figure 2. Jean-Honoré Fragonard, *The Love Letter* (1772). Oil on canvas, 83.2x 67cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
In *The Love Letter* by Jean Frédéric-Schall (Figure 3) we can once again recognize how male artists engendered letter genre paintings by depicting female subjects as overtly sexual and enthralled within the love letter they have received. In Schall’s image we see a female subject, her face in profile as she leans forward propping her head in her hand and reads the letter positioned on a pile of roses. The letter absorbs all of her attention but the same cannot be said for the audience. No, our attention is directed to her exposed breast that faces us directly. Because she is enthralled in the letter, the audience is forced into a voyeuristic position. Not only are we struck to gaze upon her exposed sexual body but we are immediately consumed to know the words that have so dearly captured our subject. Like Fragonard, Schall has eroticized female epistolary activity, portraying to eighteenth-century viewers that women seemingly have no other interest in letters unless they are letters of love.

Eighteenth century art critics came to associate genre paintings with the inner lives of women; the letter reduced that inner life to love. The female letter writer was indeed a modern woman, demonstrated in her progressive education therefore, within genre paintings set in a domestic feminine setting, most commonly the home, letters were utilized to symbolize modernity. Yet despite their portrayal of a contemporary scene, eighteenth-century letter themed paintings were characteristically regressive in their representation of women and their relationships with men. It is relatively simple to recognize the way in which male painters of the time only painted women as the readers of love letters rather than the authors of their own very important epistolary works. Just look at the work of Jean-Honoré Fragonard, one of France’s most renowned Roccoco

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artists. In Fragonard’s *The Love Letters* (Figure 4) we see a woman with enthralled with
her lover and his letters. The young woman is embraced by the arms of her lover

Figure 3. Jean Frédéric-Schall. *The Love Letter* (18th century). Oil on canvas. 33.2x
26.8cm. Musée Magnin, Dijon.
whilst she reads the words he has written for her. It is unclear to the viewer whether the woman’s joy is derived from having her lover’s arms wrapped around her or from reading his love letters.

Whether the woman in Fragonard’s *The Love Letters* derives her pleasure from the lover’s presence or his writing, they are two versions of the same thing, taking possession of the woman either physically or mentally. By including the presence of both lover and letter within the image, Fragonard reminds the audience of the role in which he, and learned men of the time, considered to be the natural order in regard to gender roles and relations between men and women: women were acquiescent to men and easily secured by their affection.\(^{47}\) This concept perpetuated the traditional belief that women were more inclined to emotional sensations, such as love, than men were and presents the notion that women are incapable of utilizing letters in the same academic method used by men.

In the face of images like that of Fragonard’s, women of the Enlightenment reclaimed the narrative of female letter writers by producing their own paintings of women taking part in epistolary practice. Women such as Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun, Adélaïde Labille-Guiard, and Anne Vallayer-Coster created artwork to use as a platform for female agency within the community of letter writers of eighteenth-century France. Their paintings refused the notion of women as the readers of male-authored love letters and placed their female subjects as holding the power of the pen. In the portraits painted by women, we see ladies and letters, however, the letter is to highlight the woman, rather than to draw attention to the absence of a man.

Vigée Le Brun’s portrait of Comtesse Du Barry de Cérès (Figure 5) provides a wonderful example of the ways in which female artists took agency in reference to women writers. Here, Vigée Le Brun displays to the audience a woman set against a dark,

\(^{47}\) Goodman, *Becoming a Woman in the Age of Letters*, 40.
neutral background drawing the viewer’s attention to the quill pen and letter that is seemingly the task Comtesse de Cérès is engaged with. The image gives the impression that the beholder has interrupted her as she prepares the message she has just composed. Unlike the genre paintings produced by male artists of the time, Vigée Le Brun’s portrait shows a woman actively engaged with a letter; although she is not writing, she is folding a letter she has just written rather than the common portrayal of a woman passively reading or dropping a letter.48

Perhaps what is most powerful about this portrait by Vigée Le Brun is the striking absence of any male influence. Nothing within the image encourages the viewer to believe that a man plays a role in the woman’s choice to read and write. Here, Vigée Le Brun shows the world that women are most certainly acting as independent agents, writing their own letters that have nothing to do with love or male affection.49 Anne Vallayer-Coster similarly situates the letter-writing woman as a freethinking individual.

In Portrait of a Woman Writing and Her Daughter (Figure 6) Vallayer-Coster displays two women, a mother and her daughter. The mother sits at a desk writing a letter, yet her attention is not focused on the task at hand, she is seemingly absorbed with her daughter who looks directly out at the viewer. The daughter shown here to be the object of her mother’s gaze is thus displayed as the subject of her mother’s letter. Therefore, the letter is possibly a tool in sealing the deal for the daughter’s marriage. If so, the letter then represents the present daughter whose absence through marriage is anticipated rather than highlighting the absence of a male as typically shown in letter... 

49 Ibid., 76.
Figure 5. Louise-Élisabeth Vigée-Lebrun, *Comtesse de Cérès* (1784). Oil on canvas. 93x75cm. Toledo Museum of Art.
writing genre paintings.\textsuperscript{50} The women letter-writers in the portraits by Vigée Le Brun and Vallayer-Coster are not concerned with justifying their actions to the audience. As viewers we may not know what they are writing but we know that they write openly and without reserve, expressing no surprise in the audience catching them in the act of writing. They sit upright in their chairs, content in knowing that their epistolary actions are morally upheld and appropriately feminine.\textsuperscript{51} Writing these letters, therefore, serves as a symbolic representation of their roles as modern women and mothers.

**Conclusions**

The Age of Enlightenment inspired new ideas about equality and justice which in turn motivated an emphasis on education that resulted in higher literacy rates than ever before. For the first time women were afforded the ability to read and write, allowing them to contribute to society in a way they never had before. For many men of France’s intellectual elite, the new position of the “social woman” was threatening to their superior position within society. For this reason, men of the Enlightenment utilized their writing and artwork to serve as a tool for removing women from the public sphere to ensure women would remain firmly planted within their domestic homes.

The efforts by intellectual men to reaffirm women’s “natural” role as mothers and care takers are explicit in some of the most notable works of the Enlightenment. Thus, the purported beliefs of equality and freedom were seemingly nothing more than words as men such as Denis Diderot and Jean Le Rond d’Alembert wrote vehemently against the formal education of women and denounced their position within the public sphere.

\textsuperscript{50} Goodman, *Becoming a Woman in the Age of Letters*, 46.
Figure 6. Anne Vallayer-Coster, *Portrait of a Woman Writing and Her Daughter* (1775). Oil on canvas, 130.1x 61.9cm. The Bowes Museum, Durham, UK.
This trend of excluding women’s intellectual efforts permeated almost all aspects of French Enlightenment culture, making its way into the genre painting that featured the modern activity of letter writing. As witnesses in the work by Fragonard, male artists solely painted women as the readers of letters, never the author of the epistolary work themselves. For women to even find themselves featured in paintings alongside letters, the male artist found it necessary to make clear to the audience that the letter as possessed by the woman is a symbol of the male presence in her life whether physical or mental.

Rather than sitting idly by as the male artists chose to inaccurately depict the relationship between women and letter writing, artists such as Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun, Adélaïde Labille-Guiard, and Anne Vallayer-Coster reclaimed agency by painting their own portraits of letter-writing women. The images produced by these women fought against the typical depiction of women as readers of love letters and placed women at the forefront of epistolary practice. By displaying women in a comfortable setting, writing letters, Vigée Le Brun and Vallayer-Coster demonstrated to eighteenth-century France that the modern woman, despite what men of letters might have said, were still feminine and motherly while being educated and contributing to society through their intellectual endeavors.

Thanks to the bravery of women like Vallayer-Coster and Vigée Le Brun, French society was shown the truth that it was obviously too afraid to face: women living in the Age of Enlightenment were ready to have the seat at the table they were previously denied. In creating artwork that showed the reality of women as writers, female artists demonstrated they were capable of doing everything men were already taking part in and could do it while remaining a nurturing mother or wife that was said to disappear within
the lifestyle of modern women. Women, writings, and letters threatened to break out of any limits imposed on them by gender or cultural norms. By presenting eighteenth-century France with portraits of ladies as both letter writers and mothers, French female artists set out an ideal that reconciles the conflict faced by elite women of this time. Struggling between new gendered ideals and the conceived “natural” state of motherhood, the modern woman was resolved within these genre portraits to represent the nuances of the social woman, she is both a writer and a mother, and capable of succeeding in each role without the presence of a man.
Chapter 3

Women of the Salons

The salon of the eighteenth century is the manifestation of Enlightenment thought. It was the gathering spot of the most influential minds of contemporary French society, all assembled under one roof to be delighted by an inspiring host. As the English writer Sydney Smith once cleverly put it, “there used to be in Paris, under the Old Regime, a few women of brilliant talents who violated all the common duties of life, and gave very pleasant little suppers.”\(^\text{52}\) Smith’s description of the salonnières serves two purposes for our understanding of the salons and the way in which male members of society viewed their hosts. First, Smith’s remark tells us that salons existed to serve as a space for facilitating entertainment amongst educated persons; they were enjoyable gatherings for many of France’s high society and bourgeoisie. On the other hand, Smith’s comment demonstrates the attitude most Enlightenment men held in regard to the women of salons, that they “violated all the common duties of life,” lending the notion that women were not meant to participate within the public as men were and by doing so they were defying their natural place in the world.

Yet despite the opinions of men like Smith, salonnières persisted in their roles, going to great lengths to foster an environment where their guests could feel at ease to openly discuss art, literature, and politics amongst their peers. The salons of eighteenth-century Paris were the foregrounds for expanding Enlightenment thought amongst a wider audience. Perhaps Count Castiglione captured the essence of the salon atmosphere best when he reflected his perspective of the institution: “To live in comfort with one’s

friends, one must be free…to entertain and be entertained, or merely be bored together. One must do one’s utmost to promote the amusement of those among whom one lives.”53 For many, salons were just this: a space to gather with respected minds and discuss the Rights of Men, politics, literature and art. However, salons were much more than locales in which people could exchange ideas, they were radically innovative in their dissemination of education and provided opportunities for individuals to improve their social standings, this reigns especially true for what salons afforded women.

At the turn of the eighteenth century it remained most common for women to live their lives almost entirely out of the public eye. They were raised within their homes by their mothers, and some women of higher stature would receive an education in the privacy of the convent, but most were kept away, learning how to take care of domestic chores and the family she would eventually have.54 It is because women were still tucked away and hidden from the outside world at this time that the publicity of the salon and women’s roles as their anchors was such a radical element of French society. It is the salon where extraordinary women such as Madame de Rambouillet, Madame Geoffrin, and Madame Necker first utilized their brilliant minds in a social setting, demonstrating to the men of the Enlightenment that they were just as capable of furthering the development of intellectual thought.

Although intellectual interactions between the sexes became much more frequent, facilitated through the formal gatherings of the salon, the paranoia and fear possessed by men of the enlightenment showed no signs of fading. In fact, the fear that French women

53 Ibid., 138.
would take the place of men within society seemingly became more prevalent with the rise in popularity of the salon and the brilliant women in charge. As women carried on unrelentingly in their new public roles, their perceived threat to men provoked the Philosophes to continue to publish academic works speaking on the “natural roles” of women. This conservative position called for a concentration on the importance of women within the private realm and domestic life. Philosophical texts were published explicitly referring to the widely-held belief that women were mentally and physically inferior to men and therefore were better suited to return, out of the public, to the domestic lifestyles of the past. Unfortunately for the intellectual women of this era and the salonnières themselves, their trust in the opinions and writings of the philosophes and male academic counterparts fostered paradoxes within the framework of their personal ideologies.

The contemporary science of the eighteenth-century emphasized the physiological basis for cognition, thus raising the issue of difference. Using the physical differences in men and women’s anatomy, scientists and intellectuals of the time attributed the inferiority they believed women to possess to the divergences in women’s bodies. This field, known as the science of sexual difference, was one of the most powerful tools utilized by men of the Enlightenment to encourage the relegation of women to the private sphere. The science of sexual difference was not only observed by intellectual men of the time, considered to be the leading explanation of the genders. Sexual difference also recognized by women which inherently brought to surface a quintessential paradox: if women were in fact organically inferior to men, then what right did they have to the

male-dominate arenas of which women were fighting to be a part? Therefore, the effort for women’s rights in the eighteenth-century France contradicted itself through the social and academic ambitions manifested in the role of the salonnière while refraining to deny or push back against the popular scientific rhetoric of the day. Rather than allowing the opinions of men to dictate how their lives would be lived, salonnières persisted in their roles making their impact on society in formidable fashion. Salonnières brought attention to the intellectual capabilities of women and for the first time demonstrated what it might be like for men and women to share a space as equals, initiating thought on gender equality and taking on initiatives for a progressive future for women in France that would later reverberate around the world. Through their work and efforts within the salons, French women influenced wider French culture and society by impacting and creating their own art, literature, and political opinions which paved the way for women’s rights and early feminism.

**Famous Salonnières**

Despite the attempt to keep this work from becoming yet another biographical work on the leading salonnières, it would be negligent to refrain from mentioning at least some of the most prominent salonnières and their contribution to gender reform in French society. The first recreational salon of Paris was designed and molded by Madame de Rambouillet. Born and raised in Italy, her move to Paris brought marriage and an intrigue with the literature of the day. Included in her dowry was a town home located in the Rue St-Thomas-du-Louvre, located in the very heart of Paris. Around 1617 she had the home entirely remodeled to create the Hôtel de Rambouillet that defied typical fashion of the

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56 Ibid., 10.
day to arrange for a series of large reception rooms where her quests could sit collectively and converse. Red and brown muddy colors were the contemporary vogue for interior decoration thus Madame de Rambouillet, clever as she was, had her walls dressed floor to ceiling in blue brocade.⁵⁷

Figure 7. Anonymous, *Madame de Rambouillet* (17th century).

Madame de Rambouillet’s style was unmatched, and she believed so strongly in her vision to facilitate a space for literary discussion and repartee that she created it herself. As the *New York Times* wrote of her,

> In order to discountenance the deteriorating tendencies of public taste, she bethought herself of giving a new impulse to the cultivation of letters, and at the same time of checking the downward course of national morality by calling attention to the depraved tastes of the times, and endeavoring to improve the equivocal styles and incorrect orthography of contemporary writers. It was with this view she instituted a system of literary reunions.58

Madame de Rambouillet’s standards for what would be discussed within the walls of her salon were very particular. The salon was not a place for gossip, it was a space for highly intellectual conversation, requiring the upmost effort from her attendees. Madame de Rambouillet herself demonstrated her intelligence with ease. She captured the attention of her guests with her charm and articulate eloquence. In fact, Latour described that the failure to accomplish an articulate contribution to the discussion could often result in judgements and criticism from the rest of the guests in company: “From time to time a newcomer, ignorant of the usages of polite speech, dares to utter a badly constructed sentence or a too-ordinary word. Veiled glances are exchanged, dry coughing, smiles hidden behind fans.”59 This type of atmosphere must have been very trying for the quests that attended Madame de Rambouillet’s salon frequently. However, it was in the blue chamber of Madame de Rambouillet in which the salon of the Enlightenment era properly began and was shaped to become the tradition that would be passed down throughout the next century.

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Unique to the salon of Madame de Rambouillet was the rank and composition of her guests. She brought together people who had come from all different origins including: writers, wits, citizens, and ladies of high birth.\textsuperscript{60} She allowed the company of rather ordinary individuals, without any rank or status, she permitted the participation of anyone who could maintain her level of polite manners and intellectual banter. The historical research focused on the women of salons by Amelia Gere Mason illustrates that the place of honor within Madame de Rambouillet’s salon was given to genius, learning, and good manners, rather than to rank.\textsuperscript{61} By bringing together people from various backgrounds Marquise de Rambouillet created a space where, as Clergue explains, “noblemen turned to study and refined pleasures, and where women were recognized as intellectual companions for men.”\textsuperscript{62} The progressive changes Madame de Rambouillet made in the typical relations between men and women within her salon made a space for women in society that had never been available before in Europe.

More than just a parallel playing field, many insist that the salons fostered an environment in which “women were raised upon a pedestal, to be respectfully and platonically adored.”\textsuperscript{63} Therefore, de Rambouillet’s salon had a lasting effect on the course of French letters. As women participated in the cognitive discussions of the salon, reading and critiquing the literature of others, they were encouraged to take up the pen for themselves. Soon, women of French high society were reading aloud their own poems and letters to the attendees of the Hôtel de Rambouillet.\textsuperscript{64}

\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 33.
\textsuperscript{63} Mason, \textit{The Women of the French Salons}, 17.
Rambouillet that the conception of an intellectual elite was born and the institution of the salon, including the culture of gender equality encapsulated within its walls was curated. The salonnieres of the eighteenth century owe their access to intellectual exchanges much to the efforts of Madame de Rambouillet and the foundations she laid in her own salon.

One of the best examples of Madame de Rambouillet’s legacy being carried on in tradition through the Parisian salons of the eighteenth-century is that of Madame Geoffrin. Born Marie Thérèse Rodet, she was raised in a middle-class family when at sixteen she was married to the respected Monsieur Geoffrin who was thirty-four years her elder. Monsieur Geoffrin had not been born into high society; rather he had come from nothing and built a tiny fortune becoming an Inspector of Taxes of Saint-Gobin. The beginning years of their marriage were rather uneventful, but the location of their home played a decisive role in Madame Geoffrin’s future. Living at the Rue Saint-Honoré, the same street that was home to the witty Madame de Tencin, Madame Geoffrin became a regular attendee of Madame de Tencin’s salon, learning from her all the best ways to delight a variety of guests and encourage intellectual exchange. In 1749, when Madame de Tencin passed away Madame Geoffrin was her sole heir to the salon, and much more than her predecessor, Madame Geoffrin understood how to attract great philosophers.

Among the salons with the best reputation in all of Europe, Madame Geoffrin’s gatherings became the hotspot for anyone in Paris who desired to be a part of the intellectual elite. Although Madame Geoffrin herself was uneducated and perhaps possessed the least formal tutoring of the salonnieres, she acknowledged her talents lay

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in humoring her guests when she remarked, “I make them faint with laughter.”

Furthermore, Madame Geoffrin introduced innovating arrangements to her salon that made her stand out among the rest. For example, she replaced the traditional supper gathering with an early dinner (our lunchtime) to

Figure 8. Marianne Loir, *Madamme Geoffrin* (1760). Oil on canvas 39.5x 32.3cm. National Museum of Women in the Arts, New York.

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allow for conversation to flow through the afternoon into the evening. Madame Geoffrin’s organization was also a key component to the success of her salon. She is known to have prepared for each and every one of her salon’s gatherings to make sure she was well rehearsed for discourse. Her gatherings were organized by topic of discussion, one for philosophical debate and the other for art criticism. One day of the week was designated to host the great writers and *philosophes* of the day such as Diderot, Holbach, Grimm, Fontenelle, and Montesquieu.

Madame Geoffrin’s relationship with the modern philosophers of Paris was highly influential. For without her help and financial backing, Diderot’s *Grande Encyclopédie* may not have ever reached publication. When the privileges granted to the text were revoked in 1759, Madame Geoffrin donated one hundred thousand crowns to the publisher, asking to remain anonymous. However, she was not only a patron to literature and philosophy. On Monday’s Madame Geoffrin dedicated her salon to the gathering of artists and displays of their contemporary works. She specifically arranged for her Monday guestlists to be composed of artists and architects, housing some of France’s best-known creators. People like Cochin, La Tour, Boucher, Vanloo, and Chardin gathered in her presence to display their art and demonstrate to the people of Paris how culture influenced their work and vice versa. By hosting a strictly art themed salon, Madame Geoffrin revealed the importance of art in French society and exemplifies the ways salonnières influenced eighteenth-century artwork.

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71 Ibid., 56.
With the growing success of her salon, so too did Madame Geoffrin’s ambitions blossom. She sought to make her salon an international gathering, bringing together personalities from all different countries. There is even evidence that Benjamin Franklin had made an appearance in her salon in 1767, although his presence was rather dull due to his lack of ability in spoken French.\textsuperscript{72} Her connections with the great men of France and foreigners allowed her to contribute to the diffusion of French culture all around the world. Madame Geoffrin is magnificent example of the radical nature of the salonnières, defying the traditional gender norms for a role within the public sphere, working diligently to curate her salon and personal education and doing so without the assistance of a man. After her husband passed away she continued hosting salons regularly and throughout the remaining years of her life she remained an independent woman. She was well-known for her happiness with the arrangement of her life which was sincerely revealed when prompted with a flattering marriage proposal, she replied: “I am quite content with my society, my situation, and with my name.”\textsuperscript{73} Madame Geoffrin’s life was a marvel of what women could achieve, all on their own, within the egalitarian institution of the salon and how that success could be wielded to influence Parisian culture and disseminate it across an international audience.

A pupil of Madame Geoffrin’s salon, Madame Necker was yet another salonnière to powerfully influence France’s Enlightenment culture. She was born Suzanne Curchod in 1737. Like Madame Geoffrin, her family had little money to offer her. Therefore, when her father single-handedly payed her tuition, it offered him great pride and extended great confidence in the life of his daughter. In her education she learned Latin,  

\textsuperscript{72} Mason, \textit{The Women of the French Salons}, 174.  
\textsuperscript{73} Clergue, \textit{The Salon: A Study of French Society and Personalities in the Eighteenth Century}, 286.
geometry, physics, science, and possibly even Greek. In her later years attending the salon of Madame Geoffrin, she learned from the best how to entertain and direct the discussion amongst her guests. Her extreme religious devotion set her apart from other salonnières yet she still welcomed the most radical of philosophers. Known for her vivacious personality, she was well-liked and admired by both men and women of France’s intellectual elite. In fact, Diderot once wrote of her in a letter claiming she is “a woman who possesses all that purity of angelic soul adds to an exquisite taste.”

Her likeability no doubt contributed to why her salon became widely popular amongst the most renowned minds of her day, including: Buffon, Diderot, Voltaire, Thomas, and more. Here these great men with brilliant women alike joined to discuss affairs of the Academy, art and culture, and decided the fate of political candidates.

Later on, Madame Necker’s salon became distinctly more political due the semi-revolutionary opinions of her brilliant daughter and the role her husband held as Director-General of Finances in the King’s ministry. The bold nature of Madame Necker’s daughter, Germaine de Staël, clearly demonstrates the power of representation. Growing up in an environment where women and men interacted and respected each other’s intellect obviously supplied Germaine de Staël with a worldview that projected a life for women much different than that lived by women before her. Through the example set by Madame Necker, Germaine learned what women were capable of yet still restricted from accomplishing in contemporary society.

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74 Hall, *The Women of the Salons: And Other French Portraits*, 89.
75 Ibid., 92.
77 Ibid., 225.
Thus, Germaine de Staël went on to become a great influence for the women’s movement in France, breaking with traditional gender norms, and speaking in revolutionary rhetoric to push forward notions of gender equality. Her mother had all the confidence in Germaine’s ability to do so, while telling Duchesse de Lauzun she fears she, herself was not made for the “great world,” Madame Necker said: “It is Germaine who should shine there and who should love it, for

for she possesses all the qualities which put her in a position to be at once feared and
sought.” Madame Necker’s relationship with her daughter, Madame de Staël, illustrates
the importance of powerful women instilling in their daughters the education and
confidence necessary to propel equality forward. The legacy of Madame Necker’s
innovative salon and aspirations would be carried on by her daughter who later became a
fervent voice in the chaos of the revolution.

**Men and the Science of Sexual Difference**

When Paris’s finest salonnières were not curating gatherings amongst France’s
leading artists and scholars they filled their downtime with intellectual pursuits of their
own. The salonnière and her salon sustained an information network based on the
exchanges of various printed materials, most commonly letters met with
correspondences. The “Republic of Letters” reflects this Enlightenment ideal in which
knowledge was expanded through the writing and sharing of letters amongst the
intellectual elite. In this space, “letters” refers to both the wider genre of literature but
also to the written correspondences between individuals. In the eighteenth-century letter
writing was considered a literary form like that of writing a novel or poetry. Although
the exchanges within the Republic of Letters was meant to foster well-mannered debate,
it frequently led to divisive quarrels instead. As Paris became established as the center for
the republic and French men of letters were brought together there, their letter writing
was replaced with verbal confrontation but these debates, now removed from the

81 Ibid., 82.
formality of letter exchange, required a new mediator. This is where the salonnière stepped in, to offer a new kind of governance in order to maintain polite conversation.\textsuperscript{82}

The salon of the eighteenth-century as spearheaded by women like those detailed earlier became the institution through which the Republic of Letters operated. Historian Dena Goodman argues that salonnières such as Madame Geoffrin and Madame Necker helped “shape the discursive project that was the French Enlightenment though the application of a distinctively republican form of government.”\textsuperscript{83} The salonnière role became ever more crucial as the salon offered a public space for exchange, it was her job both to regulate the social relations between guests and the discourse in which they engaged. Yet despite the salonnière’s role as facilitators of Enlightenment discourse, these women were often relegated from spheres of influence such as the Royal Academy and having full access to the Republic of Letters due to long standing gender norms and beliefs about the “nature” of women. After all, the popular belief at this time considered women as a disorder within society, too dramatic and emotional to handle all that men do. No matter the proclaimed notions of justice and equality that arose from the writings of Enlightenment men, their ideas of freedom seemingly did not apply to women in their personal opinions. As leading Enlightenment thinker Rousseau once wrote in \textit{Lettre de d’Alembert}, “never has a people perished from an excess of wine; all perish from the disorder of women.”\textsuperscript{84} Statements like this example from Rousseau are far from anomalies in texts from the Enlightenment era. Unfortunately for the salonnières and women in general, the leading scholarship at the time maintained that women were

\textsuperscript{82} Ibid., 89.
\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., 91.
\textsuperscript{84} Mason, \textit{The Women of the French Salons}, 228.
scientifically inferior to men and this notion was never truly contested by France’s philosophes as they continued to benefit from a male-exclusive academic realm.

Contrary to the progressive notions that stemmed out of the literature of the Enlightenment, the contemporary science of sexuality in the eighteenth century was still heavily dependent upon theories of sex that originated with the Greeks. In *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*, Thomas Laqueur traces the story of sex in the west from ancient philosophers and physicians through the origins of modern science. Laqueur demonstrates the continued use of Galen’s theory of female anatomy throughout eighteenth century science. Galen’s theory of female anatomy utilized the physical differences between men and women to categorize women as distinctly different and therefore deficient of men.\(^{85}\) Thus, the sexual science that characterized the eighteenth century, according to Laqueur, was based on a one-sex model of the body. The one-sex model views the male body as the foundation of biology. In this regard, females are considered to simply be composed of the same biological makeup as men but their organs are inverted and rearranged: the vagina is seen as an interior penis, the womb as a scrotum, and the ovaries as testicles.\(^{86}\) Furthermore, sexual difference was explained through humoral theory in which the male consisted of hot fluids, females of cold.\(^{87}\) The substances ejaculated by the two-sexes in the one-sex model were hierarchial and placed versions of one another based on their supposed power.\(^{88}\) Men’s potent sperm was considered to be the necessary component in conception and the inability of women to

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\(^{86}\) Ibid., 26.

\(^{87}\) Ibid., 35.

\(^{88}\) Ibid., 38.
conceive within themselves, among other things, became an example of the relative weakness of her body and mind.\textsuperscript{89} 

As a result of the science of sexual difference and the faith men and women placed in its authority, eighteenth-century understandings of gender convinced the people of a strict division between the intelligence afforded to men as opposed to that afforded to women. A primary example of the gendered beliefs deep-rooted in the minds of eighteenth-century intellectuals comes from Baron d’Holbach. Baron d’Holbach was an Enlightenment author and salon frequenter, yet in 1776 explained in his \textit{Ethnocratie}, his interpretation of how intelligence presents itself in women:

> Women, due to the weakness of their organs, are not susceptible to abstract knowledge, profound studies and the like which are appropriate for men; but the sensibility of their souls, the liveliness of their mind, mobility of their imagination, made them very susceptible to adopt with eagerness the sentiments of the heart.\textsuperscript{90}

The quote from d’Holbach exemplifies the derogatory nature found in the writings of Enlightenment men in regard to women and their space in the public sphere. Furthermore, his statement reflects the widely-held notion that women were more inclined to possess a “natural” knowledge that led them to excel in domestic matters such as cooking, cleaning, sewing, and child-rearing. This innate “natural” knowledge was used to categorize women as emotional, nurturing individuals opposite from men, thus attempting to banish women from the arithmetic, science, and philosophy that Enlightenment men engaged in.\textsuperscript{91} Sexual difference was used by the men that composed

\textsuperscript{89} Ibid., 60. 
\textsuperscript{91} Ibid., 295.
the Republic of Letters to argue that women were incapable of reason and therefore had no place within academic institutions such as the Royal Academy. Furthermore, the concept of women as posing a reckless sense of danger and disorder within society persisted and continued to be perpetuated by some of the salonnieres’ favorite men. Diderot was a regular guest in the salons of Madame Geoffrin and Madame Necker, yet despite his close relationships with bright, intellectually inclined women such as these he reflected on the capacity of women’s brains when he wrote:

> But do not forget that, for want of principles and powers of reflection, nothing ever penetrates far enough into a woman’s mind to carry true conviction; that the ideas of justice, virtue, vice, goodness, their self-love and self-interest still retain all the energy they may be more civilized than we are on the outside, they have remained true savages within - all Machiavellians more or less.  

Convinced that women had mastered the art of appearance, exhibiting polite behavior and manners while remaining unruly, compelled only by passion and emotions within, Diderot contradicted the efforts and achievements of salonnieres. Let us not forget it was Madame Geoffrin’s generous donation that was the very reason Diderot’s *Grande Encyclopédie* reached publication. Yet Diderot and other *philosophes* continued to diminish the intellectual capabilities of women. Their blatant denial of women’s intelligence benefitted men of the Enlightenment as it helped quell their fears that women possessed too much control over the minds of men and as a result would command the institutions men wished to exclude women from. This fear amongst learned men manifested itself not only within the scientific scholarship of sexual difference but also in the philosophical writings that claimed to understand what women and their lives work

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were best suited for, “nature did not destine them to be the intellectual equals of men, it conferred on them the more precious privilege of exerting a moral ascendancy over the family by their innate aptitude for love and unselfish devotion.”93 As we have seen, the men of France’s Enlightenment took advantage of the “unselfish devotion” of salonnières while posing said characteristic as the reasoning for which they excluded women from participation in the Republic of Letters and other academic spaces.

Unfortunately for the women whom were eager to participate within the public sphere they had so long been relegated from the texts that sought to solidify their positions strictly as wives and mothers presented them a paradox that conflicted their personal endeavors with the culture of the time. As members of the intellectual elite salonnières were exposed to and digesting the same texts as the philosophes, frequently they were reading the work of the philosophes which blatantly instructed women to return from the public eye to their “natural” role within the home. Thus, women ascribed to the sentiments that convinced them the world would become outrageously chaotic if they traditional gender roles were to alter and permit equal rights for women. Consequently, women were faced with a harsh paradox in their effort to gain citizenship and the right to vote. If women truly were incapable of reason and logic like men were, how did they believe they could participate in politics the same way men did? Historian Joan Scott argues this paradox lies at center of women’s efforts for political rights: “the apparent contradiction between the irrelevance and relevance of sexual difference, between

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equality and difference - was at the heart of the feminist project of making women political subjects.”

So, what did it mean for France’s women’s movement if women did not initially recognize the equality they were entitled to? For some women it meant thinking of men as superior and catering to the needs of men before their own. Even so, women were not forgoing their education and public roles like suggested by the men they were surrounded by. Rather, French women remained resilient in their new lifestyles. They continued reading, writing letters, painting, confronting other’s political opinions with their own and leading public lives. Women of France’s peasantry or middle class and salonnières alike relentlessly pushed the boundaries of what was appropriate behavior for a woman and most importantly, encouraged other women to do so as well through the power of representation.

While focused on the highly intellectual lives of salonnières it is easy to forget that during this time there was still a part of French society that is illiterate. It is for this reason that the importance of images and paintings cannot be underestimated as visual representation served to educate the populace on the topics for which they could not learn of in printed texts. Therefore, the paintings that arose out of Enlightenment culture replicating the atmosphere of salons were important because they showed men and women whom might not have had access to salon either due to status or lack of personal connections what the internal structure of a salon looked like.

Looking at François Hippolythe’s painting of Madame de Rambouillet’s salon (Figure 10) women are placed at the forefront of the image, demonstrating their role

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94 Joan Scott, Only Paradoxes to Offer, 33.
within the salon as the leaders and proprietors of the establishment. Furthermore, at the feet of the woman in white sits a globe and what looks like an assortment of printed texts which represent the access she has to the wider world as a result of the salon and the education it fosters. Images such as this function to show the people of France and Europe not only the Enlightenment’s cultural emphasis on the pursuit of knowledge but more importantly highlight the ways traditional gender roles were changing. Visual images like this one explicitly showing women participating equally in the same realm as men made it possible for people of all backgrounds to recognize the changes that were being made in the French capital and allowed women that were still relegated to the private sphere to see what was possible for them, igniting a spark for progress in France’s women’s movement.

As seen in the previous chapter, portraiture was one of the most popular forms of eighteenth-century artwork. Artists frequently captured the images of influential people and some, like Madame Necker seen in (Figure 11) had themselves captured on more than one occasion. What is significant about Jean-Etienne Liotard’s portrayal of Madame Necker is the props the artist chose to include within the image. For example, Madame Necker is gripping on to a book and looks as if her reading was interrupted to pose for the image as she holds onto her place in the book with her thumb. Next to her sits what appears to be a notebook and a writing utensil, signaling to the audience she is an educated woman who not only engages in literature but also takes part in epistolary practices, as well.

Portraits such as these, as evidenced in chapter two, are highly influential for France’s eighteenth-century women and their efforts for gender equality. The lack of any
Figure 10. Francois Hyppolyte, Reading of Antoine Godeau in the Literary Salon of the Lady of Rambouillet, Hotel de Rambouillet (1863). Oil on canvas.
male presence or reference forces the viewer to recognize that the role of women is changing. It is through her own initiative she reads, writes, and educates herself and she does not need a male’s assistance to do so. As images like this circulated, artwork offered insight for much of France’s population that did not belong to the intellectual elite and demonstrated the ways in which women were no longer dedicating their entire existence to take care of men and children, rather women were multitasking; they continued to fulfill the roles of wife and mother but were doing so in their own way and choosing to participate in societal issues like they never had before. In the following chapter we will recognize how images such as this helped inspire women of the France’s third estate to become politically charged and take an active stance in the revolution.

Figure 11. Jean-Etienne Liotard, *Madame Necker* (1761). Pastel 35.1x 42cm. Schönbrunn Palace, Austria.
Yet another example of the salon atmosphere depicted in art is found in Anicet Charles Gabriel Lemonnier’s oil on canvas painting of Madame Geoffrin’s famed salon (Figure 12). The image is seen illustrating the reading of Voltaire’s tragedy *The Orphan of China* to quite a sizeable audience. Compared to the depiction of Madame de Rambouillet’s salon (Figure 10) this artist has chosen not to place women in any distance from the men. The women are not sitting at the front of the conversation nor do they have any designated position that separates the from the rest of the group. Instead, the artist has chosen here to demonstrate that within the salons, women were treated as equals, looked at as intellectual peers and treated with the same respect that would be shown to men. Therefore, Anicet Charles Gabriel Lemonnier painting contributes to France’s women’s movement in a powerful way, by creating artwork that represents the progress made towards gender equality across a wider platform his image allows men and women across the continent to see how French women are taking it upon themselves to change their lives and strive for justice.

Perhaps the most perfect example of the power of representation is manifested in Germaine de Staël’s 1780 painting entitled *The Necker Family* (Figure 13). Seen here is Madame Necker passing on to her daughter what appears to be either a book or some sort of illustration. Either way, this image is a forceful piece of art as it not only demonstrates a strong, smart woman like Madame Necker teaching her daughter the importance of art, literature, and education, it reflects just how powerful the lessons passed down were as the artist herself is the little girl in the image, who was obviously influenced by her mother’s lead. Growing up in Madame Necker’s salon, seeing her active role in academics and culture evidently led Germaine de Staël to recognize she had the power to
create her own place in the world. Moreover, this painting highlights the importance of tradition and passing down the lessons of one’s life to the next generation so that the fight

Figure 12. Anicet Charles Gabriel Lemonnier, Reading of Voltaire's L'Orphelin de la Chine in the Salon of Madame Geoffrin (1812). Oil on canvas 129.5x 196cm. Musée national des Châteaux de Malmaison et Bois-Préau.
for gender equality can be perpetuated and continually made better. Germaine de Staël painting is a telling act as it exemplifies the power of representation and the impact watching her mother, a woman who refused to be relegated to the private sphere had upon her daughter’s life. Most importantly, this image tells the audience how Germaine de Staël views her personal role in French society as a woman that has been opened to a realm of possibilities and refuses to be told otherwise. With this mindset, Madame de Staël became a popular female voice throughout the revolution and helped inspire other French women to take active stances in the face of oppression, contributing to France’s early feminist movement.

Conclusions

The eighteenth-century was the height of the Enlightenment thought and there was no better representation of the ideals and rhetoric of the movement than the salon. The salon was the primary locale for the philosophical thinkers, writers, artists, and politically charged citizens to gather and exchange ideas. For the women of France, salons provided opportunity not only to participate within the conversation but to be leaders amongst men, proving to themselves and those around them what women were capable of. Although the salon served as a safe-haven, a place in which women were recognized as equivalent, foreshadowing what gender equality might look like in French society, the men were not ready to forfeit their “superiority.”

To ensure women remain constrained by traditional gender roles France’s philosophs published works explicitly denying women’s equality even going further to explain why they believed women were inferior beings and incapable of participating in
Figure 13. Germaine de Stael, *The Necker Family* (1780). Oil on canvas.
society they way a man can. Yet it wasn’t just their own writings that denied the rights of women, eighteenth-century science was characterized by sexual difference and the ways that physical divergences between the sexes designated what each gender was better suited for. Science of sexual difference, considered the most advanced understanding of sex at this time, prompted the women whom engaged with the scientific literature and the male proponents of it with a heavy paradox. Trusting the scholarship led these women to contradict their efforts for gender equality as they openly acknowledged the supposed biological superiority of men. Despite the fact, women persisted. Salonnières continued leading men in intellectual discussion and commenting on artwork and politics. Women continued writing letters of their own and reading to further their education. No matter what they or the men around them thought, France’s progressive-minded women remained resilient in pushing the boundaries on what was considered acceptable behavior for females.

Salonnières utilized their platform to continue their fight for the right to vote and more through popular imagery. In portraits salonnières could be recognized of their high status but more than that, they were captured with books in their hand, writing utensils at their sides with demonstrated to the public the ways in which gender norms were being reforms and women were not longer being confined solely to the roles of wife and mother. Other images displaying scenes from notable salons also illustrated to wider audiences the equality women were offered within the salon, explaining to each viewer that women possessed the intellectual capacity to advance Enlightenment thought and were more than willing to do so. Through the contradictions presented in science of sexual difference and philosophical writings on the “natural” roles for women,
salonnières used their unique position to impact France’s broader society and encourage women to participate in the public sphere. Their work in salons and influence on Enlightenment era artwork effectively motivated women to exercise their voices throughout the revolution, as we will see in the following chapter, which in turn pushed forward France’s women’s movement and gave rise to early feminist crusades.
Chapter 4

Women and the French Revolution

Eighteenth-century France is a curious place to study because of the many contradictions that characterized the culture. Despite the massive circulation of Enlightenment principles like separation of church and state, liberty, tolerance, and secular progress there remained an absolutist monarchy that held power based on the concept of divine right. While the salonnière and her upper-class peers rejected the notion of divine right and grew irritated with the current monarchical leader’s outrageous spending, they discussed what a more representative and progressive government system might look like. Although their ideas may have been targeted to improve the living standards of the greater population, the people that spent their days learning, writing and debating in salons were not the ones affected by the extreme financial debt their nation faced. No, the ones that really understood the economic turmoil of France were the shopkeepers, artisans, and ordinary day laborers that made up the largest proportion of France’s population. Facing bread shortages and widespread hunger, these individuals had also been influenced by the growing intellectual movement and the importance it placed in the opinion of the public. Therefore, the growing agitation of the public steadily increased as King Louis XVI and his foreign bride, Marie Antoinette, continued their ultra-lavish lifestyle in their Versailles Palace and their subjects suffered. The population that had once been so loyal to their divinely inspired ruler had no lost hope in his ability to successfully govern and pull France out of economic depression, leading to a thinly veiled collective endeavor to incite change through radical action.
As the French monarchy continued to slide further in the direction of bankruptcy the members of the aristocracy attempted to reform the system but lose faith in their King to be truthful about the financial situation. In their efforts to institute policies based on the inclusion of the public opinion through the Assembly of Notables and the meeting of the Estates General, France’s population only erupted into further disorder. In the summer of 1789, France broke out in revolutionary fury and with no quick end, the nation descended into mayhem. Things certainly escalated when in 1791 the King himself attempted to flee Paris to escape the revolutionaries. As France fell into revolutionary chaos the public refashioned the body politic by revoking their traitorous King and envisioning the people led by liberty, which came in the form of a woman. The popular image of Lady Liberty, or Marianne, in newspapers and revolutionary pamphlets forced the image of a political woman into the minds of the nation and French women acted upon the opportunity to achieve rights of their own. The organized political movements by French women throughout the revolution and the achievements they made not only in legal reforms but also within the public sphere helped redefine gender expectations. Using their voice and the power of representation through popular images and literature, the women of the French revolution followed in their path laid by the salonnières to demand their rights and bring to fruition feminist activism.

The Revolution

The French Revolution began in the summer of 1789. There is much debate as to how the revolution came about and there are many explanations for its rise, however there are a number of influences that led France to erupt in political revolution. Since his accession in 1774, Louis XVI faced an ever-worsening financial crisis. France’s
monarchy had been financing major wars throughout the century and its loans lent to assist the American colonists in overthrowing Britain were returning at a slower rate than expected. Yet in 1776, King Louis XVI appointed Jacques Necker to Director of Finances, an extremely popular decision due to his approach at financing wars, this appointment helped to win over approval from the general public. 95 Unfortunately, Necker’s strategies were not enough and France’s inability to reinvigorate its depleted funds through tax revenue during times of peace by the 1780s put France at a critical point in which France could see no other future than that of bankruptcy. Thus, in an effort to implement institutional progress, they gathered the Assembly of Notables in 1787 to discuss tax reform and propose how to bring government expenditure back in line with government income. 96 Composed of high-ranking nobles, ecclesiastics, and state functionaries, the Assembly of Notables possessed no real legal power which forced their proposed reforms to be subject to the approval of the French parliaments. Reforms were presented by the Ministers of Finance but the plans ultimately failed due to the one hundred and forty-four assemblymen’s unwillingness to bear the burden of increased taxation. 97 The one proposal that did come to life following the Assembly of Notables was the call for the meeting of the Estates General.

The Estates General was a legislative system that provided for a more representative style of government that served as a consultative assembly to the King. The Estates General was made up of three different estates: the first estate stood for the Catholic clergy, the second estate represented the most high-status members of society:

95 Hunt, The French Revolution, 2.
96 Ibid., 5.
the aristocracy, nobles, and people whose stakes were very much invested within the state, the third estate represented nearly all of France’s population from a more middle-class laborer like lawyers to the poorest peasants in the countryside. Then in fact, the 1789 call for the Estates General was demonstrative of the ways the Enlightenment had impacted the culture and society as the third estate and those members whom were educated, working-class professionals like lawyers and merchants sought to have a stronger voice in the government’s policies. On May 5th, 1789 the Estates General convened in Versailles near the royal chateau. Once there, the third estate learned that despite their group representing over ninety-percent of the French population, the King would uphold the etiquette that was practiced the last meeting of the Estates General back in 1614. For the greater population of France, this meant their collective vote would be weighed equally amongst the votes of the first and second estates. After learning that their desired representation would not be granted from the royal authorities, the Estates General declared themselves the National Assembly on June 20th, 1789 in an event referred to as the Tennis Court Oath. That day in Versailles, the National Assembly vowed “not to separate, and to reassemble wherever circumstances require, until the constitution of the kingdom is established.” The declarations made by the National Assembly were in direct defiance of the king and therefore marking the Oath of the Tennis Court as one of the earliest acts to demonstrate that France had certainly become revolutionary.

99 Ibid., 47.
A month later, on July 14th, 1789 the King attempted a coup d’Etat in which he dismissed the ever-popular Jacques Necker to replace him with conservative ministers who the King believed would be able to bully the Estates General into doing what he wanted. However, once the news of Necker’s dismissal reached Paris the people revolted against the King by storming the Bastille, a prison centrally located in the capital. The population broke down the doors, stole weapons and armor and defeated the royal forces for a triumph that signified the people’s commitment to defend the outcomes they hoped to come from the Estates General. Most significantly the storming of the Bastille marked what most historians refer to as the beginning of the French Revolution as it was the first time that the general population were victorious against the royal authorities and forced the monarchy to capitulate.101 Thereafter, the National Assembly began thinking of how to have a new country, organized on different lines. Primarily they were conceptualizing how to remove privilege from the elite members of society like the clergy and aristocracy in an effort to level all people to equal citizenship. The ideas of equality, justice, and liberty desired for a new France culminated in the end of August 1789 with the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen set by the National Assembly. The declaration is perhaps the most fundamental document in the progress of European history. It was not only the first text to unequivocally put citizens at the center of political reform but it became the foundation on which the French Revolution could build upon.

As Paris remained a hotbed of political ideals and revolutionary furor, the most radical revolutionaries grew weary of the conservative bloc to the royal authorities and began to recognize said positions as a threat to the progress made within the first year of

101 Sydenham, The French Revolution, 32.
the revolution. Furthermore, the original optimism that the revolution was for everyone and therefore would be accepted and supported by everyone is dwindling down as the conflict between those who support the monarchy and those who demand a new representative government became more obvious. The tension between these groups quickly became violent and riots through the streets of Paris turned deadly, forcing a division between royalists and revolutionaries that seemed irreparable. However, those remaining monarchical supporters reconsidered their positions when they were betrayed on a late summer’s night in 1791. The violence in Paris continued to threaten the monarchy and with the King’s unwillingness to adopt the revolutionary’s constitution the situation saw no sign of improvement. Thus on June 21, 1791, Louis XVI and his family fled Paris to the eastern frontiers of France. The King’s escape from the capital has continued to raise questions ever since: Was Louis XVI attempting to reach the frontier zone where his army could protect him from the swarms of angry mobs? Or, was Louis XVI trying to escape France all together and leave his people in their great time of need? Whatever the circumstances the King and his family’s flight to the East was seen by the people of France as a treacherous act and lost him many of his remaining supporters.  

This in effect played a significant role in how the revolution took a radically violent turn. Here can be witnessed the rise of Robespierre, a leading politician who had been a part of the National Assembly from the earliest stages. Robespierre had a marvelous reputation throughout the capital of moral purity during a time in which politicians and now the King himself were seen to be very corrupt. The King’s betrayal of his people

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102 Timothy Tackett, *When the King Took Flight*, 12.
103 Ibid., 17.
reinforced the people’s support for Robespierre and helped influence his rise as a revolutionary leader.

Working in Paris as a journalist, Robespierre held the perfect position to maintain an audience for his political agenda. As he became increasingly more radical the revolutionary factions drew further distances between one another. Robespierre led the radical group known as the Jacobin party and distained the more moderate revolutionaries known as the Girondist party, his radical nature soon took a violent toll on the population of Paris. As Robespierre’s views grew ever more extreme he began accusing individuals of being suspected conspirators against the revolution and charging them to die in a public execution by a guillotine.\(^{104}\) This late period of the revolution in 1793 becomes known as the Terror. The Terror exemplified how the revolution went from a revolt for reformed government to an all-out civil war amongst the people of Paris. It was a period characterized by great fear. Once an individual was suspected of conspiring against the revolutionary effort they knew they would surely see their death by the blade of the guillotine. When one was accused of such conspiracy Robespierre and the Committee of Public Safety would hold a revolutionary tribunal where the “conspirator” would be accused of treason and sentenced to death.\(^{105}\) During this horrifically violent period the King, Queen, and moderate revolutionaries, along with 40,000 other “conspirators” would be killed for being accused of treason against the revolutionary agenda.

During the period of terror, the leading radical organizations: the Jacobins, led by Robespierre and the rising Sans-Culottes, made up by the general working-class, politically minded citizens continue to follow such lines of inquiry like that of Rousseau


\(^{105}\) Ibid.
and argued women’s natural role is within the home. Despite the revolutionary efforts of women and the feminist literature that arises throughout this period the radical factions begin to demonize women with political interests. Yet the radicals’ abhorrent refutation of women in politics did nothing but encourage politically charged women to persist in their fight for equal rights. For some women, their fight for equal rights would cost them their lives by the blade of the guillotine but it was the bravery of these women that ignited feminism in France and sparked a movement that would persist for centuries to come.

**Feminist Leaders and Women’s Participation in the Revolution**

Amongst the broad demands for social and political reform that characterized Enlightenment era and revolutionary France arose feminism. The position of the salonnières and their breaking of gender normative roles had a large influence on the educated women of French society. Furthermore, the revolution and its progressive demands provided women with what they believed to be a great opportunity to finally seize equal rights. Eager to be a part of bringing change to France, women fought alongside men in all stages of the revolution. However, there were some instances in which the legal status of women prohibited their participation such as the Estates General and National Assembly conferences.

Even after the storming of the Bastille and the citizen’s victory over the French royal forces there remained a great ambiguity over the status of the King and his citizens. Although the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen had been released in August of 1789, the King had yet to ratify the document of the proposed constitution.

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offered by the National Assembly, leaving the fate of the nation up in the air. The revolution was well under way but there still lacked reform for the starving people of France. Without a change in sight the population had grown restless and agitated but none more so than the women of France who found themselves unable to provide food for their children, themselves, and their storefronts.

The female merchants in the Parisian marketplace had grown tired of the high bread prices and chronic shortages. Thus, on the morning of October 5th, 1789 a group of women from the Easter markets in Paris joined together in voicing their anger. As they moved through the streets they forced a local church to strike its bells, the sound gathered quite the attention and soon women from surrounding neighborhoods joined in their protest. In what is now referred to as the Women’s March on Versailles or the October March, women from all over Paris joined together, marching to confront the monarchy. The mod of women stopped at City Hall where they took all the weapons and provisions available. Some women carried makeshift weapons including their kitchen blades and they became more threatening as they took cannons from the Hôtel de Ville to drag along the way. This spontaneous march which led ordinary women of Paris twelve miles in drenching rain became one of the largest demonstrations of the revolution. Once they arrived at Versailles the women immediately sent representatives to the King demanding an audience with the deputies of the National Assembly. Before the night was over, thousands of men had marched to Versailles to help the women in their goals. Early the following morning, the men and women gathered outside the palace forced their way

108 Ibid., 59.
inside, making it into the royal family’s private apartments where they demanded the
King return to Paris and lower the cost of bread.\(^ {110}\) Their forceful tactics succeeded and
Louis XVI agreed to move himself and his family back to Paris where he would be forced
to listen to popular demands of the people, or so they hoped.

The march on Versailles, however, was not the only instance that demonstrates
women’s active role in the revolution. Aside from storming Versailles women joined in
the politics of the revolution by writing petitions and publishing their desired outcomes of
the revolution. Perhaps the most famous female author of the French revolution is
Olympe de Gouges. The self-educated daughter of a butcher, Olympe was working as a
playwright in Paris when the revolution broke out.\(^ {111}\) Following the release of the
Declaration of Rights of Man and of the Citizen in 1789, de Gouges responded in 1791
by publishing The Declaration of Woman and of the Female Citizen. In writing this text,
de Gouges hoped to bring light to the failures of the French revolution in the recognition
of gender equality.\(^ {112}\) In her declaration de Gouges wrote, “This revolution will only take
effect when all women become fully aware of their deplorable condition, and of the rights
they have lost in society.”\(^ {113}\) She called to action the women of France to recognize their
oppression and join in the fight for equal rights and citizenship. De Gouges followed the
seventeen articles of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen point for
point, demonstrating the blatant exclusion women witnessed in the declaration of 1789.

\(^ {110}\) Ibid.
\(^ {112}\) Ibid., 35.
\(^ {113}\) Ibid., 42.
Olympe de Gouges was fearless in her pursuit for women’s rights and gender equality. She held nothing back and voiced her opinion as strongly as she could. For instance, de Gouges opened her declaration with a strong interrogation for the men of France: “Man, are you capable of being fair? A woman is asking: at least you will allow her that right. Tell me? What gave you the sovereign right to oppress my sex?” Her bravery was unmatched, and her feminist notions were strikingly progressive. However, de Gouges’ lionhearted nature was not received well by male revolutionaries and their radical counterparts. In the Jacobins crusade to demonize political women, Olympe de Gouges found herself a victim of Robespierre’s reign of terror. In the fall of 1793 the Revolutionary Tribunal in Paris convicted Marie Antoinette of treason and sent her to the guillotine. After killing the most prominent female figure in France, the Revolutionary Tribunal continued in its effort to silence women whose endeavors they believed were better suited for mothering, cooking, and cleaning. To the Jacobins and Sans-Culotte radicals, Olympe de Gouges represented everything a woman should not be, but, for women all over France she provided hope and inspiration for what could be possible in the future. However, her refusal to conform to the gender roles ascribed by the radicals led her to face trial in November 1793 quickly followed by her execution at the guillotine.

Another great leading female figure of the revolution was Madame Roland, wife of Jean-Marie Roland, who served the King as the Minister of the Interior. The daughter of a jeweler, Roland came from humble beginnings but was fortunate to have parents that desired a bright future for her. She received some education in a convent school in Paris

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114 Ibid.
as a child but she was known to have always been fascinated with the world around her and found herself wrapped up in literature from the time she could read and late into her life. After the death of her mother, her father fell into a wicked gambling addiction that brought great financial burden on young Madame Roland, forcing her to take interests in his jewelry business and the desires of her neighbors. It was at this time that Roland explains she garnered support for progressive movements that would lead France out of the archaic monarchy and to a liberal republic. “Undoubtedly,” she wrote of this period in her life, “our situation has a strong influence on our character and our opinion, but it can be said that the education I had received and the ideas I had acquired through study or through contact with the world all united to inspire e with a republican enthusiasm.”

The experiences that Madame Roland was put through as a young girl helped her to become a leading voice for the interests of the common people throughout the revolution. Madame Roland was courageous revolutionary, she worked tirelessly alongside her husband and served as a part of the Giordinist party, she believed that without the fight for justice, it would fade into oblivion. “If we do not die for liberty, we shall soon have nothing left but to weep for her.” Notice here how Roland uses a female representation for the body of liberty, this became a powerful tool for women revolutionaries to reconceptualize women’s political participation in the minds of the public. Unlike Olympe de Gouges, Roland represented a more traditional woman. She was much more reserved in her fight for women’s rights which perhaps made her notions

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117 Ibid., 77.
easier to digest for the men that refused to think of gender equality. Yet, her concepts of equality did not differ much from de Gouges as they both shared the desire to see women obtain citizenship and the legal right to participate in political action in France.\textsuperscript{119} Therefore, Roland was still too unconventional for most men of this period. Her activism and association with Giordins brought her the same fate of France’s leading political women. Punished for being a woman with strong opinions, when Roland climbed the scaffold of the guillotine a Parisian official denounced her for being a “woman-man” who refused to stick to the designated roles of the sexes.\textsuperscript{120}

In the same year that leading female revolutionaries like that of Olympe de Gouges and Madame Roland were sentenced to the guillotine, politically charged women of Paris had grown tired of the second-class treatment they experienced in co-ed political groups took it upon themselves to form a coalition for the purpose of gender equality. On May 10, 1793 the Society of Revolutionary Republican Woman was created. These women sought to defend the revolution while simultaneously seeking to advance their own agenda, namely women’s rights.\textsuperscript{121} These women, like their feminist peers were attacked by Robespierre and his radical Jacobins. Nevertheless, they were able to make progress within public opinion of women and their involvement in the political realm through visual representation. In ways similar to the strategies of the salonnières, these women were able to make their greatest impact through the images included in political pamphlets they distributed but also images of women found themselves centered in

\textsuperscript{120} Censer and Hunt, \textit{Liberty, Equality, Fraternity}, 61.
newspapers, art galleries, and places in which the public would be forced to reconcile with the notion of political women.\textsuperscript{122} By incorporating images of women fighting for the revolution and women situated as the representation of liberty, graphic images and famed paintings helped mold the public’s conception of women in politics away from that of Robespierre’s and closer toward the notion of equal opportunity.

**Visual Representation and Women**

The concept of women possessing power over men through their sexuality created an overwhelming anxiety in the minds of male members of French society throughout the eighteenth-century. Many believed that women could manipulate and control the thoughts and actions of the men they held relations with.\textsuperscript{123} Therefore, as Louis XVI lost considerable favor of his people, men directed the blame for Louis’ failed responsibilities to his wife, Marie Antoinette.

In the water color entitled *Louis seize, impuissant* or *Louis sixteen, helpless* (Figure 14) we see a portrayal of Marie Antoinette and her royal husband. In this image Marie Antoinette leans back in a chair while exposing her breasts and genitals to Louis XVI who also exposes himself while standing before her. Not only is Marie Antoinette positioned in a way to seduce Louis XVI but she also wraps her leg around him as to pull him in closer to her. This image exemplifies the fear that plagued male members of society. It demonstrates the perceived power female sexuality held over men and how that power supposedly influenced French politics in the eighteenth-century. In her article “Representing the Body Politic: The Paradox of Gender in the Graphic Politics of the

\textsuperscript{122} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{123} Gutwirth, *The Twilight of the Goddesses*, 84.
French Revolution,” Joan B. Landes describes the dilemma that faced the French public following the traitorous acts of their formerly beloved King Louis XVI. When Louis XVI and his family fled Paris to escape the revolutionary mobs, “the king’s once sacred body had to become first a criminal body; one condemned according to a new, higher morality of crimes against the public’s liberty and the state’s security.” In order to replace the king’s sacred body, Landes argues, it became necessary for him to be replaced with an allegorical figure that could stand for the ideals of the revolution. For the French, the

Figure 14. *Louis seize, impuissant* "Louis sixteen, helpless" (1789). Watercolor 9.5x6.5cm. Bibliothèque Nationale de France. French Revolution Digital Archive. Stanford University Libraries.


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rising figure for which the revolution to be represented manifested in that of Lady Liberty. Images of a female leader representing the justice and equality desired from the revolution proliferated political pamphlets, newspaper graphics and popular paintings throughout the revolution, emphasizing the inclusion of women within the revolutions goals.  

For many citizens of France, the image of Lady Liberty depicted the body politic and constituted a portrait of hope for justice and equality. Images of women involved within the revolution, however, were not limited to the allegorical representation of Lady Liberty; perhaps the most accurate representation of women’s role in the revolution showed them taking action the way they did: alongside men in the fight for their country. A clear example of the revolutionary battles women engaged in is witnessed in Paul Delaroche’s *The Conquerors of the Bastille Before the Hotel de Ville* (Figure 15). Here the audience is drawn in to see a woman holding tightly onto a man for assistance as she is obviously wounded from participating the in storming of the Bastille. Her body language tells the viewer that the man she holds onto is either someone she knows well or trusts as she leans her weight on him for his support and uses his momentum to carry her forward. To place the woman at the center of the image demonstrates where the artist wished to draw the audience’s attention and in doing so Delaroche has illustrated the severe lengths in which women were willing to fight for France. Furthermore, the injuries sustained by the woman are seemingly more drastic than any the man has taken. Her arms wrapped in a make-shift brace, blood stains across her clothing and the look of exhaustion upon her face highlights the courage and bravery that was possessed by

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125 Ibid., 22.
women revolutionaries in France. Moreover, this painting demonstrates to the broader public that women were just as active in the revolution as men and were willing to get their hands dirty if it meant a brighter future of their shared nation.

Figure 15. Paul Delaroche. *The Conquerors of the Bastille before the Hotel de Ville in 1789* (1839). Oil on canvas. Musee de la Ville de Paris, Musee du Petit-Palais, France.

Yet another image that depicts the strength of women’s revolutionary furor is a popular political cartoon that circulated Parisian newspapers following the success of the
Women’s March on Versailles (Figure 16). The stamp shows the people’s celebration on their return from Versailles yet the aristocracy and clergy are offset and replaced with women from the popular classes and national guardsmen.

Figure 16. Triomphe de l’armée parisienne réunis au peuple a son retour de Versailles à Paris le 6 Octobre 1789 “Triumph of the Parisian army gathered to the people on his return from Versailles to Paris on October 6, 1789” (1789). Water color 21.5x 37cm. Bibliothèque Nationale de France. French Revolution Digital Archive. Stanford University Libraries.
This image is powerful in its display of women taking a strikingly active role in the celebration, first they are at the forefront of the depiction, signifying the primary role they played in this particular protest and they march along carry liberty trees. It is an image of emancipation - the women are not relegated to walk behind the men or separate themselves in any way. Instead, the women are intermingled with the soldiers and guardsmen showing France that together, men and women are capable of accomplishing the goals of the revolution.

Due to the remaining beliefs against the inclusion of women in politics, there exist few images that solely depict the revolutionary activities of women. As seen in Figures 15 and 16, most revolutionary artwork always included images of the noble men that fought for their freedom from monarchical rule. There are few existing images that focus solely on the political efforts of women. Although they are hard to come by, images like (Figure 17) which depicts a club of patriot women meeting in a church were highly influential in women’s fight for recognition in front of the law and gender equality. See below how the image is filled with women debating without listening to the voices of the men around them; the women are captured in their own argument and have deemed themselves capable of handling the dispute without male intervention. Also included in the image is the depiction of women possessing education. One woman appears to be taking notes of all that transpired at the club’s meeting and another woman is spotted reading a book or newspaper. By broadcasting an image such as this one to the larger population of France, the people of Paris were not only informed on the dynamic participation of women in revolutionary activities but women of Paris learned of club gathering that were going on and therefore had
the opportunity to join the movement for justice. The power of images such as this played a formidable role for women living in Paris.

Figure 17. Chérieux, *Club des femmes patriotes dans une église* “Patriot Women’s club in a Church” (1793). Oil on canvas 40.8x 54.5cm. Bibliothèque nationale de France.
at the time of the revolution. Through the power of representation women were able to visually recognize what their revolutionary efforts could look like and begin to envision a future in which women shared equal rights with men.

**Conclusions: The Rise of Feminism in the Revolution**

Prior to the French Revolution, the women that maintained ideas of progress and dreamed of an existence out of the private sphere and into the public were primarily women of the upper classes. This was mainly due to the access these women had to a small education which therefore provided them with the skills to read and write and advance their own personal knowledge through literature. In the salons of the early eighteenth-century these educated, upper-class women hosted both men and women and provided a glimpse of the gender relations that would persist throughout the revolution as frequently men and women worked side by side to achieve their desired goals. Yet the fact remains, the opportunity to experience a life outside the home was rather exclusive and not the everyday expectations of ordinary French women. Although artwork and portraiture helped the general population become more familiar with these women and the strides they were making within the public sphere it was not until the break out of the revolution that women of France’s middle and lower classes were provided the opportunity to take part in political discourse.

The breakout of the revolution was life-altering for anyone living near Paris in 1789. Louis XVI had made it clear that it would be no simple task to overthrow his monarchy and implement a new form of government. Because of the challenges that faced the revolutionaries, it became clear to most that the efforts of the population must be cohesive and it must include as many supporters as possible. There were of course
people like Robespierre that believed the only place for a woman was within the home and that her “inclinations towards emotion” suited her best for a role as wife and mother.\textsuperscript{126} However, there were a great deal of progressive men that supported the women’s cause for citizenship and were eager to garner women’s participation in the revolution. Thus, the French Revolution provided the opportunity for women to not only advance the political agenda they shared with men but to push for rights of their own.

Women of all different backgrounds from bakers and mothers to aristocrats and artists fought tirelessly throughout the revolution to achieve goals such as citizenship and the right to vote but also the right to divorce if she so chooses. Aside from the efforts made within the public sphere and the academic culture of the Enlightenment, the French Revolution was seemingly the first time that women demanded equal rights before the law.\textsuperscript{127} Furthermore, the documents and images that arose from the women in the revolution brought forth concepts of equality more radical and progressive than any before. From Olympe de Gouges and Madame Roland’s feminist literature, to the paintings and engravings of women active in the revolution, to the concept of a female figure allegorically representing the body politic, out of the French Revolution erupted feminism.

Women’s representation through artwork made a broader impact upon French society and the cultural expectations for the role of a woman. The displays of women active not only in the intellectual and political realm of the revolution but also in the bloody violent protests demonstrated to audiences far and wide that whether or not the French monarchy or National Assembly would recognize legally recognize rights of

\textsuperscript{127} Mezler and Rabine, eds., \textit{Rebel Daughters}, 234.
women, women were going to get out and take for themselves what they knew they
deserved. By pushing back against the cultural expectations ascribed to the sexes, French
women utilized the chaos of the revolution and the ideals of the Enlightenment to push
forward notions of women’s rights and bring life to feminist activism.
Conclusion

The culture of the eighteenth-century was characterized by the Enlightenment movement and the progress of academic thought. Ideas that pushed forward notions of reason, education, and liberty for all coursed through the upper classes of society that had the privilege to afford education and the skills that came with it. Within this framework arose the Parisian salons of the Enlightenment which became the primary institutions for academic discourse. But their unique patronage brought more to life than the intellectual efforts of men; it encouraged the equality of the sexes and prompted the women of the salons to participate within the public sphere. Salonnières utilized their unique position within society as a platform for the progress of women and gender equality in eighteenth-century France. The most influential method in which women achieved this goal was through visual representation in popular artwork.

As much of French society remained illiterate at this time, artwork and graphic images served as tools to teach the general population of the advances being made in the French capital. Despite the progress made and the egalitarian position women held within salons, men of the Enlightenment continued to deny women equal access within society. By creating images that perpetuated beliefs that women were more emotional than men and therefore incapable of possessing reason, men of the Enlightenment sought to keep outside of the academic realm and strictly confined to their traditional domestic roles. Thankfully, the women of eighteenth-century France were not easily deterred and persisted in their fight for equality by continually pushing the boundaries and refusing to conform to traditional gender roles. The images produced by female artists such as Élisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun helped to tear down regressive notions of women’s intelligence and emotional fervor by depicting women reading and letter writing for no
other reason than to enhance their own educations. Furthermore, the women of salons used their educations to their advantage as they wrote letters of their own and sometimes produced their own artwork in their downtime from hosting political debates within their homes. In doing so, they demonstrated what women were capable of and the place they deserved to possess within the public sphere.

The Salonnières leading roles as women of education and access to life outside of the home largely impacted the women in the world around them. Their brave actions and strong-willed nature carried down into the following generations as women took an active role in France’s revolution. As the radical ideas of liberty and equality circulated in the atmosphere of Paris and the chaos of the revolution ensued, French women continued in the legacies of the salonnières and persisted in the fight for equality they had started by creating political clubs and leading revolutionary demonstrations such as the March on Versailles. What’s better, the revolution was not exclusive to high-status members of society and the efforts to ensure equality and feminist notions in the new France became a shared trait amongst women from all different backgrounds.

In a similar fashion as that of the salonnières, the women that participated in the French revolution used graphic images to help demonstrate to the general public what they were capable of and the goals they wished to achieve. There continued to be great resistance from men that believed women should serve in no other realm than the private home. Yet once again French women proved resilient. They fought alongside men in every step of the revolution and on October 5th, 1789 demonstrated that it was the women who were courageous enough to demand actual reform from the monarchy. As artists soon depicted scenes from the revolution, it became ever more clear that the role of
women in the revolution was anything but passive. Indeed, women were large contributors to the fight for equality even in the face of adversity. Through the power of representation and popular imagery women of eighteenth-century France were able to demonstrate to France’s wider society that anything a man could do - they could do better. In their fight for women’s rights, salonnières and their revolutionary counterparts helped achieve greater justice and give rise to feminism that would persist for women in France and across Europe for centuries to come.
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