

**Virtue Rewarded? Women and the Politics of Virtue in Eighteenth-
Century France
Part II**

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From about the middle of the century there was a change of emphasis in the language of virtue. This was the growing vogue for a form of natural virtue, based on the belief that virtue was an innate and sociable quality which predisposed people to seek to benefit others.¹ Although virtue had originally implied a masculine quality, this new emphasis tended to accord a pre-eminent place to women and to qualities considered particularly feminine. Women were thought to have more natural sentiments than men, to be closer to nature. Their natural feelings had not been curbed by the demands of a public career, military service or the market place. Their virtue was also said to be purer than men's because women were much less likely to be susceptible to the 'passions'. But this new stress on womanly virtue tended to accentuate traditional female qualities of devotion to family and home. The gap between natural virtue and political status was far from easy for women to bridge.

The ideal of the naturally virtuous woman found its most vigorous expression in the pages of literature. The novel form was particularly conducive to the exploration of the social position of women; all the more so since women were effectively excluded from specifically political theory. Fictional discussions provided space in which to formulate new conceptions of the moral role of women. As early as 1750 the novel form had witnessed a shift in attitudes. Moral virtue was fast becoming a quality which was associated more often with 'womanliness' than with 'manliness'.²

The tradition of fictional writing featuring virtuous women and their moral dilemmas went back at least as far as *La Princesse de Clèves*, Madame de La Fayette's novel of 1678; but the heroine of this book was a member of courtly society and her struggle to maintain her virtue was largely confined to her inner moral world. Subsequent novels were more prepared to assess women's virtue in relation to society at large and demonstrate the impact of virtuous women on the lives of others. The moving heroines of Richardson's novels *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded*, and *Clarissa* (*Clarissa Harlowe* was translated by Prévost in 1751) enjoyed almost a cult status in France and helped to strengthen enthusiasm for novels that dealt with the vicissitudes of feminine virtue. Both these novels took

as their focus a struggle between a virtuous woman and an unscrupulous man of superior birth and social status who lacked moral integrity. The inference was that an elevated social position was more likely to engender pride and even vice, whilst virtue belonged to the socially obscure, and particularly to women. This theme was to be played out with innumerable variations, on both sides of the Channel.

One of the earliest and most influential examples of the new emphasis on feminine virtue in literary form came in Madame de Graffigny's *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* (first published in 1747). This book made a great impact and went through many editions, retaining its popularity right up until the end of the century. Its heroine, the Inca princess, Zilia was kidnapped by Spaniards, and later taken to France. Though exiled from her native land, Zilia retained her loyalty to her own religion and her culture, as well as her own moral values, based on nature rather than the artificial values of so-called civilisation. She was one of the first fictional examples of the 'noble savage', although 'virtuous savage' would be a more accurate description. Her position as an isolated and perpetual outsider in French society enabled her to comment - often critically - on it for she was not subject to its values. The French, she claimed, admired luxury (le superflu) more than virtue or honesty, or good sense.³ Coming as she did from a simpler people than the French, she was closer to nature, truth and virtue. 'Happy is the nation which has no other guide than nature, takes truth as its principle, and has virtue as its inspiration.'⁴ The French by contrast were drawn to superficiality and duplicity. They lacked self-respect. The lamentable effects of this were seen mostly clearly in the treatment of women, about which Zilia was openly scathing. She criticised in particular the way in which marriage was used to debase women, and also the poor education offered to girls, which positively discouraged true virtue and merit.⁵ Girls were taught to comport themselves genteelly, and attend to outward appearances, to 'regulate their bodily movements, control their facial expressions, maintain an outward decorum, such are the essential tasks of their education...' Parents prided themselves on these achievements, whilst neglecting to tell their daughters 'that an honest countenance is nothing more than hypocrisy if it does not stem from honesty of the soul.'⁶

Zilia's virtue was transparent, like the mirror in which she saw her own reflection for the first time, much to her amazement. She was uncorrupted, and therefore in her moral judgements she saw things as they truly were. She later learned, however, that her betrothed, Aza (to whom she had been writing her letters) had succumbed to the blandishments of the Europeans, adopted

Christianity and betrayed both Zilia and his native culture. Unlike him, we are told, Zilia spoke no Spanish and learned French fairly late in the novel. Language itself is suspect. It is a means of deceit, for people use it to lie to and mislead one another. Thus the Spanish conquerors lied to Aza. But Zilia was not deceived by language. Her very ignorance preserved her. Actions, not words, counted for her.⁷ Aza, however, adopted what Zilia would describe as 'the fantastic honour of Europe', and in so doing abandoned the virtue and sincerity so fundamental to his people.⁸ In common with many fictional women of the eighteenth century Zilia's virtue was stronger than that of the men around her, and came to her more naturally because she was immune from the passions to which men were so susceptible. Although she had been abandoned by the man she loved, she remained true to him and rejected the proposal of marriage made to her by the Frenchman, Déterville, who loved her. She asked Déterville to renounce his 'tumultuous sentiments' which caused him such anguish. In place of love she could offer him true friendship and cultivate in his heart 'virtues which you have not known there.'⁹ Thus the 'civilised' Frenchman will learn the meaning of true virtue from the woman 'savage'.

A woman was more likely to be virtuous than a man because she was believed to be less susceptible to sexual passions. The woman herself was socially fairly powerless - reflecting the actual position of most women in society. But in fiction at least, a woman was empowered by her virtue. Her virtue acted as a measure, a standard against which the state of society, and the integrity of men might be judged. Therefore women could be a force for moral virtue, though their influence was confined to their own immediate circle - family, friends, neighbours, the poor.

Was this a 'bourgeois' virtue? It was anti-aristocratic or, more accurately, a reaction against the courtly values of the *honnête femme* so in vogue amongst the previous generation. Noble women embraced the ideal as frequently as bourgeois ones, at least in their literary preferences. Madame de Genlis even called her daughter 'Pamela'. But she was a member of the court nobility and as such had wider choices open to her than most bourgeois women when it came to the codes by which she lived her life. The rather more relaxed moral codes of the court offered an alternative value system which proved rather more enticing than a life of suffering martyred virtue. Clarissa's sad fate was very edifying and emotionally involving, but hardly one that any woman would wish to emulate. As for the fictional Pamela, as everyone knew, in real life virtue was very rarely rewarded, and a servant girl who clung to her virtue was highly unlikely to find her wealthy employer capitulating and offering her marriage.

One of the most influential writers on women's virtue in the eighteenth century was Rousseau, of course. But in this respect (as in much else) he played a somewhat ambiguous and contradictory role. The most negative (even notorious) judgement on women's virtue was that which he offered in *Emile*. Having spent many pages grooming Emile for citizenship and setting him on the path that will one day lead to Emile becoming a 'man of virtue', Rousseau used the section on Emile's future mate, Sophie, to set out his ideas about the nature of woman and the education best suited to her role in life. It was remarked by many contemporaries that his approach here was in marked contrast to his radical ideas about the education of boys. Emile was to be taught to cultivate independence of mind, to set store on inner integrity rather than on social appearances. Emile was to be a true man, at one with himself. His education was designed to be in accordance with nature. Sophie's upbringing owed much less to 'nature' than to traditional cultural expectations about the role of women in French society. The qualities to be instilled in her were much closer to the artificial and stilted values of the outmoded model of the *honnête femme* than the independent virtue of a Clarissa or a Zilia. According to Rousseau, Sophie's education should complement her nature, but he argued that the nature of woman was different in almost every essential respect from that of man. Emile was taught to be free, to think for himself. Sophie was to be subject to restriction, conformity and the systematic stifling both of her natural bodily self-expression, and the use of her reason. Chastity was by far the most important virtue for her. Not only that, for Sophie, appearances were vital. It was not enough for her to *be* virtuous; she must also *seem* to be virtuous.

It is not only important for a wife to be faithful, but to be judged to be so by her husband, by her neighbours and by all the world; it is important for her to be modest, attentive, reserved, and to display before others, just as to her inner self, the evidence of her virtue.¹⁰

This was the old double standard under a different guise. Now nature, rather than God, was the authority on which the subjection of women was based. For Sophie as a woman the category of 'seeming' was more crucial than 'being', than her own inner thoughts. Sophie could only exist in relation to society and particularly the eyes of her father and husband, not as an individual in her own right.

Man, in doing good, relies only on himself, and can brave public opinion;

but woman in doing good, only fulfils one half of her duty, and what people think of her is as important as what she really is. It follows that her system of education must be different in this respect to our own: opinion is the tomb of men's virtue, but it is the throne of women's virtue.¹¹

Had Rousseau's view of women rested only upon his portrayal of Sophie we would have been hard put to it to understand why so many of his women readers found him an inspirational author. But Rousseau's portrait of Julie, the heroine and focal point of *La Nouvelle Héloïse* was much more positive - and also much more admired by most female contemporaries.¹² Julie was a more subtle, independent-minded and attractive figure than the sadly doll-like and passive Sophie. The key to Julie's strength lay in her virtue. Nor did her virtue consist primarily in the appearance - or even reality - of chastity. On the contrary, Julie lost her chastity early on in the novel, to her tutor, Saint-Preux, the man she loved and who loved her. Her friend Clare wrote to her, having heard that Julie and Saint-Preux had become lovers, making this point explicitly:

... how many virtues you still have in spite of the one that is lost. Will you be less gentle, less sincere, less modest, less *bienfaisant*? Will you be, in a word, less worthy of all our homage? Will honour, humanity, friendship and pure love be less dear to your heart?¹³

For Julie, then, chastity was only one of the virtues. She remained the moral focus of the novel. It was she who spoke out in forthright terms against the practice of duelling when she heard that her lover intended to fight on a point of honour. She could see clearly the essential futility of that elitist means of gauging the worth of a man.

Oh God! what is this miserable honour that does not fear vice but only public blame...

Oh my friend! If you sincerely love virtue, learn to serve it after its own fashion, and not after the mode of men... is the word virtue only an empty name for you, and will you only be virtuous when it costs you nothing to be so?¹⁴

She was not speaking here *merely* as a woman, pleading and tearful, afraid for the safety of the man she loved. Rather she asserted her own right to make moral and philosophical judgements. As a virtuous woman she was empowered

to speak out against the false expectations of noble honour which were based on social appearances. It is through her eyes above all that the reader is shown that traditional concepts of male honour offered a woefully inadequate moral code by which to live.

When Julie bowed to her father's wishes and married the man of his choice, Wolmar, Rousseau presented this as a positive choice. Through her submission she redeemed herself for the loss of her chastity. She achieved a higher virtue through her denial of passion which Rousseau always saw as inimical to virtue, in this case her illicit passion for Saint-Preux. In submitting to patriarchal authority Julie gave up her own individual autonomy, but received in exchange moral power, as the virtuous wife and mother. She is transfigured: as wife, mother, friend, mistress of the household, and benefactress of the villagers, she generates sublime virtue all around her and becomes the emotional heart of the idyllic little community at Clarens. She and her husband became dispensers of *bienfaisance*, helping the poor and sick and she thus had the happiness of transforming their lives and being blessed by them. Even her former lover was swept up by the example of virtue which she gave, and was transformed by it. But Julie's self-mastery was achieved with immense effort, and the suggestion in her final letter is that by her death Julie escaped the conflict between her passions and her virtue.¹⁵

Elsewhere in the novel, however, the social codes that exacted conventional moral behaviour, particularly for women, were enforced by Julie and her husband. Julie may have been a reformed sinner, but for other women social redemption was more difficult to acquire. We learn, for example, that Milord Edouard, the English lord and friend of Saint-Preux, had loved a former prostitute, Laure. She subsequently reformed her life, and now loves virtue, but it would still be wrong, we are told, for him to marry her.¹⁶ Julie herself sees her role as mentor for her servants partly in terms of ensuring that the sexes are kept apart to avoid unsuitable liaisons. The servants are encouraged to denounce each other for moral failings, replicating Roman mores.¹⁷

Rousseau's view of women has tended to provoke outrage in his modern readers. But to most women of his own time his heroines, motivated by their sensibility and inspiring love, offered an attractive image. They provided women with an empowering model within that sphere in which they actually led their lives and helped to give them a sense of their own worth as wives and as mothers. To paraphrase Mary Wollstonecraft (who admired the education of Emile, whilst loathing the portrait of Sophie) such women had power over their men, not over themselves. But power for women as independent individuals was simply not an

option for most women in the eighteenth century. And Julie - and even Sophie - certainly had an edge over those tales of Lucretia and other virtuous women of antiquity who appeared somewhat cold and austere, lacking sensibility and natural feeling. When Mercier was editor of the popular and pioneering journal for women, the *Journal des Dames*, he depicted the Spartan women who put *patrie* before their children as extreme and inhumane. Most of his women readers would probably have agreed with him.¹⁸

Rousseau's contribution to debates about the role of women was contradictory in its effects. Some women writers took up the challenge of his ideas, and used them strategically, adopting those aspects which appealed to them and ignoring some of his more chauvinist pronouncements.¹⁹ The question of women's education and their potential for virtue was pursued with renewed vigour in a number of works and often with conclusions that conflicted with those of Rousseau.²⁰ For example, Mme de Genlis' work, *Adèle et Théodore, ou Lettres sur l'éducation* owed much to Rousseau's ideas about virtue as the goal of education. She was not an uncritical admirer of the Rousseauist view, and extended some of his arguments about education to include women. Nevertheless, there was little to shock or scandalise in the kind of virtue she envisaged as suitable for young girls. It was a socially conformist quality: 'I understand virtue to mean the taste for honest things, founded on principles, and fortified by the habit of doing good.'²¹ In a similar Rousseauist vein was Mme d'Epinay's *Les conversations d'Emilié* (1774 and 1782) which was also much more sympathetic to the idea that the potential of girls could be considerably expanded if given the opportunity.

Sometimes men took a more radical view of the possibilities of education for women than women writers themselves, possibly because it was harder for even the boldest woman to be seen to be too outspoken about the extent to which the perceived inadequacies of women were imposed upon them by men. A few men went so far as to contend that women's potential for virtue was as great as that of men's, but that they had been consistently denied the opportunity to develop it, confined to the domestic sphere and taught to cultivate a narrow outlook. One of these was J.F. Dumas: a future Jacobin, whose younger brother was to be the president of the Revolutionary Tribunal in the Year II. J.F. Dumas wrote a prize-winning essay for the Academy of Châlons-sur-Marne in answer to the question, *Quels sont les moyens de perfectionner l'éducation des jeunes demoiselles?* (1783) in which he argued that there was no difference between the capacities of men and women, only in the education that they were given. Given an equal education, women would be as capable of virtue as men:

One cannot doubt that they are capable of the greatest virtues: the

substance from which they are fashioned is not different in nature to ourselves. Why then deny them the faculties of feeling, thinking and reasoning? And if they have such faculties, what right have we to state their limits?²²

It followed from this that women's vices stemmed mostly from the fact that they were being deliberately kept in ignorance, 'women are not ordinarily more virtuous than they are enlightened'.²³ Dumas' views on women were radical up to a point, but he accepted that women would still be socially subservient to men, since custom dictated this, and that they should play no role in politics. He did think that they should learn 'political science', but this was for the somewhat curious reason that they would then be better able to understand the human heart.²⁴

In an essay inspired by the same contest, Choderlos de Laclos took both a more radical and a more pessimistic view of the situation. He did not question women's potential to be citizens and the equals of men, but he said that their will had been sapped by the habits of slavery, which was a state incompatible with virtuous citizenship. Women, destined to be the companions of men, had become their slaves and had come to prefer, 'vices that are debasing, but useful, to virtues that are more painful for a free and self-respecting being'. If women wanted to emerge from this state of slavery, education was not enough, it would only alleviate the symptoms without effecting a cure. Men would not help women, he wrote; they had, 'neither the will, nor the power'. This kind of subjugation called for a social transformation on a cataclysmic scale, '... one does not emancipate oneself from slavery except by a great revolution'.²⁵

Overtly political theory had little place for women - they were principally there either as symbols of abstract virtue or as catalysts for male action. But in the wider question of the relationship between politics and morality women had a significant place. Increasingly morality was associated with women and as such they were seen as having an impact on the moral health of the nation. Women, it was said, had a civilising influence on 'society' (i.e. men) through their gentleness, culture and sensibility, their proximity to nature, which provided a counterpoint for the more brutish passions of men.²⁶ Their influence was largely indirect. Custom and culture dictated that women should not participate in public life, and relatively few women were prepared to challenge this convention. But by laying stress on the importance of good 'moeurs' for social improvement and moral regeneration, it could be argued that women could play an important social role

in uniting and regenerating society. What began as a role within a woman's own family could be extended to include a wider community, and thus might aid the reform of the 'nation'.²⁷

The idea that women could be standard-bearers of refinement and morality, through qualities that complemented rather than imitated those of men, found its way into many of the conduct books of the period. Typical of these was *L'Ami des femmes* by Boudier de Villemert, a popular work which went through many editions but was first published in 1758, thus predating Rousseau's major contributions on femininity.²⁸ Boudier de Villemert emphasised the moral virtue of women, and their superiority over male passion in a classic formula, repeated many times since. The roles of the two sexes were not equal, but were complementary. Their virtues also complemented each other. The coming together of male and female virtues ensured the harmony which kept society balanced and morally thriving. To women belonged 'those amiable virtues that console and embellish humanity'.²⁹ Social harmony arose from each sex fulfilling its separate - but equally valuable - functions in their own sphere.³⁰ Women's role was to refine men and improve them morally, through their influence on their husbands and children, but also on society itself.

Let women understand their duties therefore, and carry them out to their own benefit and our own. They have given us examples of the highest virtues; examples which exert a great power over us, for the sweet hold that women have over us inclines us to follow their example. We shall always be what women want us to be; and it is in their own power to change for good or ill the face of society, and to give to men the character that they would wish them to have.³¹

Most women lived better-regulated lives than men and were much less susceptible to sexual passion. Virtuous women would not, he said, take part in matters relating to politics and to government, but what need had they of such political rights, when they had such power over men.³²

It was not only men who viewed the matter in this light. Most women agreed though, like Madame de Lambert, they sometimes gave the impression that they were accepting with reluctance and resignation one of the few opportunities open to them to make a positive contribution in a world in which they were effectively barred from a more active role.

A notable venue for women's ideas was the *Journal des Dames*. Like all permitted journals it was not allowed to engage in political matters. But it had

several women editors who evinced strong ideas about the potential achievements of women. When Madame de Montanclos became its editor she set out her views in an introductory letter, written in the month when the *parlements* were recalled and the language of citizenship was very much in the air. She declared that the avowed goal of the *Journal* was to spread the example of women's virtue:

... the particular goal of this journal is to make known the virtues, spirit and talents of the Sex to which it is dedicated. It is not that I wish to make great claims for myself, but it is true that I do wish to oblige men to render to women the justice that it has pleased them to deny us. It is hardly flattering to us that men should pay tribute to the charms that nature has given us, if they then want to denigrate the virtues and talents that Heaven has given us. I want to make it known, if I can, that we can do all the good of which humanity is capable, because it is in our souls to do so...³³

A similarly appreciative view of specifically 'feminine' virtues was taken by Thomas in his *Essai sur le caractère, les mœurs et l'esprit des femmes*. This was the work that provoked Diderot into writing his work *Sur les Femmes*. Of the two, Diderot's work is the better-known now both for its sympathy for women's situation and for its pessimism about the possibilities for changing their lot, whilst Thomas's work has faded into relative obscurity. But it was Thomas's work which was the more typical of views on women at that time, and which exerted a greater influence on contemporary opinion.³⁴ He argued that women had a positive social role to play, a role that grew out of their virtue. According to Thomas, women were, 'the most virtuous sex, as well as the most tender-hearted'.³⁵ He gave numerous historical examples from the classics of women who exemplified political and patriotic virtues, though like many others he found the single-minded virtues of Spartan women distasteful rather than admirable.³⁶ He concluded that the situation was very different in modern France, and the two forms of government, monarchy and republic could not be compared. Nowadays it was almost exclusively men who possessed the patriotic virtues. In France women no longer possessed the virtue of 'love of the *patrie*', or that of 'the general love of humanity'; their virtue did not extend to such abstract levels, but expressed itself in concern for their families and in those close to them.³⁷ Thomas went through all the private or domestic virtues point by point, comparing them in men and women, and deciding that in most of these virtues, it was women who excelled.³⁸ Most importantly, they possessed the greatest degree of *bienfaisance*,

that quality of active, social, philanthropic virtue. Thomas described *bienfaisance* as 'this compassion which unites people in spirit to the less fortunate.... It is well known that women have the greatest share of this quality. Everything in their natures predisposes them to be softened by pity'.³⁹ The idea that women were particularly suited to *bienfaisance* was founded on the traditional role of women as dispensers of charity, especially through the church. But as the term *bienfaisance* acquired a more actively social resonance, so were women able to play a more socially responsible role, which extended beyond their own families to the unfortunate.

When women delved into the history books the repertoire of virtuous heroines available to them was certainly limited. Mostly they were dutiful wives and daughters. Women might make patriotic gestures, but these were set within the confines of what was considered to be suitable feminine behaviour. Occasionally, however, historical women were seen to undertake warlike acts. These were women who held important positions of public responsibility, usually through their husbands. Circumstances might call upon a woman to act in defence of the *patrie*, and then she would act like a hero with warlike 'virtus'. Madame de Genlis, for example, quoted the story of the princess of Khitan, who suppressed a mutiny in her husband's army during his absence. Another tale she recalled approvingly was an account of how one of the wives of the emperor Han-ngai-ti of China protected her husband from an escaped bear by throwing herself between them. She later told him, 'I am only a woman, my life is of little account to the happiness and tranquillity of the state: but your own life is essential to it, I should not hesitate to sacrifice my life to save yours.'⁴⁰ This again was women's virtue as sacrifice, though here the point of her sacrifice is to benefit the state and the public good, rather than to simply save her husband. In most such historical tales the proviso was added that the heroine in question played a public role only reluctantly and out of necessity, since it was understood that a virtuous woman would not desire to play a public role.

There was often interest in how virtue might be given a feminine twist. Madame de Montanclos, for example, an editor of the *Journal des dames* considered the story of St Louis from quite a different perspective from that of the traditional annual panegyrics. Rather than write about the renowned king himself, she turned her attention to his mother, Blanche de Castille on the understanding that behind every strong man there is an even tougher woman. She said that, just as men wanted to hear about the virtues of a Cato, or Marcus Aurelius, so women in their turn wanted to hear stories of 'the heroines who have

earned their place in the glory of nations'.⁴¹ According to Montanclos, it was to his mother that the king owed the public virtues which had so often been praised. Indeed, she declared, when given the opportunity by Louis's absence at the crusades, Blanche herself had been a better ruler than her own son because she had had the welfare of the people more truly at heart. She had given the people an example of virtue, relieved the poor, ensured the happiness of the people and skilfully maintained the peace. She had opposed the crusades as a waste of life and money, showing a greater degree of statecraft and consciousness of the 'public good' than Louis had done, for he had put 'passion' and 'his zeal' before the good of the nation.⁴² Feminine virtue gave the nation peace, and this was ultimately better for the nation than traditional warrior virtues.

Sometimes virtuous heroines were depicted as regarding the public good as separate from - and even more important than - their duty to their husbands. For example, the *Journal des Dames* recounted the story of Cezely, Dame de Barry, an example of 'French virtues' who took over the defence of the town of Leucate during the time of the League, after her husband had been taken hostage by the rebels. She continued to hold the town, even though the rebels carried out their threat to execute her husband - thus putting loyalty to the king and the *patrie* above wifely duty: a bad wife, but a virtuous woman.⁴³

We have seen that there were two principal methods by which women's virtue could be delineated. The first was the argument that, since men and women were fundamentally alike, women's virtue did not differ in its essential character to that of men. There were precedents for this view in the writings of Plutarch and in the Christian belief in equality of souls and a few notable eighteenth-century authors had also pursued this line of reasoning.⁴⁴ The second line of argument was much more frequently voiced. This was based on the belief that women and men differed in the essential characteristics of their minds as well as their bodies by reason of their different natural functions. Women were designed by nature to be mothers, and this affected every aspect of their personalities. Consequently their virtues differed in character to those of men. Feminine virtue complemented rather than emulated masculine virtue, and promoted sensibility, feeling for others, and an instinctive sense of moral rightness. According to this view women shrank from taking part in public or political activity themselves, but by inspiring their husbands and sons they made it possible for men to be active citizens. Without women, therefore, men would not be virtuous.

We should not, however, overemphasise the distinction between these two

forms of feminine virtue. They were not necessarily mutually exclusive, and it was not uncommon to find an author employing first one argument and then the other, depending on the strategy adopted.⁴⁵ The particular association of women with *bienfaisance* drew on both these arguments. *Bienfaisance* or social virtue was believed to be a universal quality, transcending birth and gender. But it was claimed also that women had an especial affinity for *bienfaisance* as an extension of their natural compassion.

In the 1780s there was a veritable cult of *bienfaisance* and women played a key role in it. In 1787 a certain Madame Gaston-Dufour took up her pen to deliver a scathing attack on the work of the Chevalier de Feucher who had argued that women were responsible for the decadence of morals. She compared the virtues of men and women at different stages of their lives and concluded that at each stage women possessed more virtue than men. Above all, women monopolised the social virtues. Of young women she said: 'Chastity, sensibility, compassion, courage, are the virtues that have resonance for us, from the age of twelve years up until twenty', whereas young men were dismissive of these qualities.⁴⁶ Speaking of older women, she said that it was they, not men, who carried out acts of *bienfaisance*:

Let the Chevalier de Feucher, in order to convince himself of truth of what I have said, go and look in the local parish registers where the names of people who have carried out acts of *bienfaisance* are written, and he shall see if any names but those of women ever appear there. Men grow more hard and bitter as they age: whilst women become still more tender and feeling as they grow older; they cannot bear to witness people suffering without being of help to them, without aiding them with their own money; men, by contrast, will no longer part with a penny, unless it be to debauched women....⁴⁷

Ruth Graham has conducted some intriguing research into pamphlets on the social situation of women written by women and sympathetic men in 1788 and 1789, including the unofficial 'women's cahiers' that appeared in response to the calling of the Estates General.⁴⁸ She demonstrated that the writers of such pamphlets were primarily concerned with the social and familial role of women. They built on the idea of the regenerative power of women's virtue. Most of the pamphlet writers disagreed emphatically with Rousseau's hostility towards socially active women. Rather, they argued that women's special talents fitted them to play a more significant social role than had heretofore been granted.

It has been argued that the network of masonic lodges provided a temporary

haven for social equality to exist, which contrasted with the rigid social hierarchy of *ancien régime* society. Some lodges in France admitted women, but historians have disagreed over the impact of this. Some believe that it led to an actual empowerment of women, whilst others argue that they were marginalised in what was essentially a male institution.⁴⁹ One thing we can note, however, is the extent to which the rhetorical ideals of freemasonry (with their emphasis on social virtue) were open to a variety of strategic interpretations which emphasised the power of feminine virtue. One argument which might be made was that female virtue was equal to that of men. In 1782, a woman freemason addressed her 'brothers and sisters' in her lodge with the assertion that, 'just as there is no sexual distinction for the soul, so neither is there any sexual distinction for the virtues'.⁵⁰ More typical, however, were the more conventional terms used by Mathon de la Cour when he addressed women members of the *Loge d'Adoption du Patriotisme*. He spoke in flattering terms of women's *bienfaisance*, sensibility and virtue but he claimed that the principal role of women's virtues was to inspire men with patriotism and active virtue.⁵¹

The Revolution of 1789 gave a new dimension and relevance to debates on the social and political role of women's virtue. The transformed political context places the revolutionary debates outside the scope of the present article. But before concluding, there are some continuities we should note. During the Revolution a number of women participated in a socially powerful - and socially acceptable - role as active members of the many *comités de bienfaisance*, which were set up to replace the traditional activities of the Church in the dispensation of charity. Olwen Hufton has shown that whilst it was men who directed these revolutionary *comités* it was women who carried out most of the actual work of visiting the poor.⁵² In some ways this division of labour reflected women's traditional role in the Church of dispensing charity to the poor. The reaction of the constitutional clergy to women who assumed greater authority in this sphere during the Revolution was sometimes ambiguous or hostile.⁵³ These *comités* formed part of a series of institutions set up to deal with the gap left by the dismantling of the social functions of the Church. But we have seen that the thinking that inspired them went back at least to the mid-century. In addition to the *comités de bienfaisance*, there were also schemes for women to be actively involved in the education of small children, the care of the sick and poor, and even for women to form a 'bureau for the general surveillance of morals', a kind of moral police for republican virtue.⁵⁴

The problems underlying the relationship of women to politics, virtue, equality, education and citizenship were just beginning to be addressed. The great majority of revolutionaries (including women) endorsed the view that women's virtues differed from, and complemented, those of men; women's public role was an indirect one - to facilitate the regeneration of morals in the new society. Few political theorists were prepared to adopt the idea that virtue was the same quality for men and women; but those who did so found that they had a radical new argument with which to rethink political rights and citizenship. The marquis de Condorcet's *Sur l'Admission des femmes au droit de cité* (1790) traced the arguments for equality between the sexes and women's right to citizenship. Women, he said, had the same qualities as men, including the ability to acquire 'ideas about morality'. Whilst women were superior to men in 'the gentle and domestic virtues', neither were they lacking in 'the virtues of the citizen' when there was need.⁵⁵ Across the Channel, the first great feminist writer, Mary Wollstonecraft, was inspired by the Revolution to use the rhetoric of virtue as the basis for the first sustained argument to state that women had a right to equality and an active public voice. Her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) would expose some of the weaknesses (as well as the strengths) of optimistic arguments based on equality which did not also take into account differences and what she would later term, the particular 'wrongs of woman'. Her arguments would take the debate onto a different level, but were only made possible by the long-standing rhetorical tradition of using ideas about women's virtue as a polemical strategy for their empowerment.

The discourse of feminine virtue provides a thought-provoking counterpoint to the mainly masculine discourses of political virtue. It shows us that the same discourse that could be used to empower and bestow a right to participate, could also condition and entrap the speaker. The rhetoric of virtue was double-edged for women, certainly, and not without its problems and ambiguities. But it provided strategic possibilities which could be exploited. Virtue in its civic sense left little space for women in the public sphere. But women were not completely passive agents in this discourse. They could, and did, employ notions of moral virtue and *bienfaisance* to justify arguments that women could play an active role in society to improve public manners and morals. Models of virtue such as Zilia and Julie may seem limited now, but they represented a considerable step forward in the way that women were being represented during the eighteenth century. The language of virtue was employed within the social confines of what was possible for women at that time. But at its more radical edge it challenged the political and social conventions and provided a voice for women who, hitherto,

had been voiceless.

Note: All the translations in this article, except where specifically acknowledged, are the author's own.

¹ On the rise of the concept of natural virtue, see M. Linton, *The Politics of Virtue in Enlightenment France* (Palgrave Press, forthcoming), esp. chaps 2 and 4.

² A.H. Willeford, 'The Feminization of Virtue in Eighteenth-Century France: Women, Ethics and the Novel, 1700-1750' (Phd, University of Washington, 1988), p. 162.

³ Mme F. de Graffigny, *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* (this edition: New York; The Modern Language Association of America, 1993), Letter XXIX, p. 125. Nb this letter (together with Letter XXXIV) first appeared in the 1752 edition. See Introduction by Joan DeJean and Nancy K. Miller (eds), *ibid.*, p. xxv.

⁴ *Ibid.*, Letter XXXII, p. 134.

⁵ *Ibid.*, Letter XXXIV, pp. 137-8. Nb this letter first appeared in the 1752 edition.

⁶ *Ibid.*, Letter XXXIV, pp. 139-140.

⁷ *Ibid.*, Letter I, p. 24

⁸ *Ibid.*, Letter XXXIX, pp. 161-2. In fairness to Aza one should note that in a sequel Madame de Graffigny took pity on her parted lovers and Aza's apparent betrayal is explained away. See Graffigny, *Oeuvres choisies de Mme de Graffigny* [sic], *augmentées des lettres d'Aza* 2 vols (London, 1783).

⁹ *Lettres d'une Péruvienne*, Letter XLI, pp. 167-8.

¹⁰ *Emile*, *op. cit.*, book V, p. 698.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 702-3.

¹² See P.D. Jimack, 'The Paradox of Sophie and Julie: Contemporary Response to Rousseau's Ideal Wife and Mother', in E. Jacobs et al (eds), *Women and Society in Eighteenth-Century France* (London, Athlone, 1979), pp. 152-65.

¹³ Rousseau, *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, 4 vols (Paris, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1959-70), III, Part 1, Letter XXX, p. 99.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, Part 1, Letter LVII, pp. 154-6.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, Part 6, Letter XII, pp. 740-3.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, Part 6, Letters II and III, pp. 638-55.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, Part 4, Letter X, p. 463.

¹⁸ *Journal des Dames*, June 1775, pp. 377-9.

¹⁹ See G. May, 'Rousseau's "Antifeminism" Reconsidered', in S. Spencer (ed.), *French Women and the Age of Enlightenment* (Bloomington, Indiana Press, 1984).

²⁰The influence of Rousseau's ideas on education has been brought to light by J. Bloch, *Rousseauism and Education in Eighteenth-Century France* (Oxford, The Voltaire Foundation, 1995).

²¹ Brulart de Genlis, *Adèle et Théodore, ou Lettres sur l'éducation*, 3 vols (Paris, Maestricht, 1783), I, Lettre XXVI, p. 153.

²² J-F. Dumas, *Discours sur cette question: Quels sont les moyens de perfectionner l'éducation des jeunes demoiselles? Proposé et couronné en 1783 par l'académie des sciences, arts et belles-lettres de Châlons-sur-Marne*(Neuchatel, 1783), p. 9.

²³*Ibid.*, p. 29.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 102-3 and 97.

²⁵ P.A.F. Choderlos de Laclos, *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1951), pp. 404-5.

²⁶ On the cultural influence of women in the Enlightenment, see S. Tomaselli, 'The Enlightenment Debate on Women', *History Workshop*, 20 (1985); and D. Goodman, *The Republic of Letters: a Cultural History of the Enlightenment*(Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1994), esp. pp. 6-10.

²⁷ See J. Bloch, 'Women and the Reform of the Nation', in Jacobs, *Women and Society in Eighteenth-Century France* , pp. 3-27.

²⁸ On the popularity of this work , see D. Williams, 'The Fate of French Feminism: Boudier de Villemert's *Ami des Femmes*', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 14,1 (1980), pp. 37-55.

²⁹ P.J. Boudier de Villemert, *L'Ami des femmes, ou la philosophie du beau sexe* (1758; this edition, Paris, 1788), 'Question préliminaire', p. viii.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. xii-xiii.

³¹ *Ibid.*, chapter VII, 'Vertus des femmes', p. 222.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 43-4.

³³ *Journal des Dames*, November 1774, pp. 8-9. On the successive strategies of various editors of this journal to secure a more positive social role for women see N. R. Gelbart's fine study, *Feminine and Opposition Journalism in Old Regime France* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1987).

³⁴ A.L. Thomas, *Essai sur le caractère, les moeurs et l'esprit des femmes* (1772), republished in *Oeuvres de M. Thomas de l'Académie Française* (Amsterdam, 1773).

³⁵ Thomas, *Essai sur le caractère....des femmes*, p. 42.

³⁶On Spartan women see for example, *ibid.*, pp. 10-17; and on Roman women, pp. 23-6, 34-5.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 106-9.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 95-116.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 105-6. On *bienfaisance* and its relationship to virtue, see Linton, *The Politics of Virtue*, chap.4

⁴⁰ S.F. Brulart de Genlis (comtesse de), *Annales de la vertu, ou Cours d'histoire à l'usage des jeunes personnes*, 3 vols (Paris, 1782), I, pp. 128-9; 143.

⁴¹ M.E. de Mayon de Montanclos, 'Précis histoire de la vie de Blanche de Castille, Reine de France, et mère de St Louis', in *Oeuvres diverses de Mme de Montanclos*, 2 vols (Grenoble, 1790), II (bears the date 1781), p. 221.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 227-38.

⁴³ *Journal des Dames*, August 1764, pp. 6-17.

⁴⁴ Notable advocates of the women as equal thesis included P.J. Caffiaux, *Défenses du beau sexe, ou Mémoires historiques, philosophiques et critiques pour servir d'apologie aux femmes*, 4 vols (Amsterdam, 1753).

⁴⁵ On the deployment by women writers of various strategies based on equality or difference, see K. Offen, 'Defining Feminism: A Comparative Historical Approach', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 14 (1988), pp. 119-57.

⁴⁶ Madame Gaston-Dufour, *Mémoire POUR le Sexe Féminin CONTRE le Sexe Masculin* (1787), text in Michael (ed.), *Les Tracts féministes au XVIIIe siècle*, pp. 44-7.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

⁴⁸ See R. Graham, 'Rousseau's Sexism Revolutionized', in P. Fritz and R. Morton (eds), *Women in the Eighteenth Century and Other Essays* (Toronto, Hakkert and Co., 1976).

⁴⁹ These arguments regarding the position of women freemasons are explored in J.M. Burke and M.C. Jacob, 'French Freemasonry, Women and Feminist Scholarship', *Journal of Modern History*, 68 (1996) which takes the view that the hundreds of women who participated were neither patronised nor marginalised.

⁵⁰ *Esquisse des travaux des loges françaises et de l'adoption unies sous le titre de La Concorde à l'Orient de Dijon* (Dijon, 1782), pp. 52-5, cited by F. Vigni, 'Les Aspirations féministes dans les loges d'adoption en France', *Dix-huitième siècle*, 19 (1987), pp. 211-220. I am grateful to Dena Goodman who first drew this to my attention.

⁵¹ C.J. Mathon de la Cour, *Discours prononcé à Lyons dans la loge d'adoption du patriotisme, le 27 juillet 1785* (Lyons, 1785), pp. 1-4.

⁵² O.H. Hufton, *Women and the Limits of Citizenship in the French Revolution* (University of Toronto Press, 1992), pp. 78-9, 84.

⁵³ On the relationship between the Constitutional Church and women and the dispensation of *bienfaisance*, see R. Graham, 'Women versus Clergy, Women pro Clergy', in Spencer, *French Women and the Age of Enlightenment*, pp. 128-40.

⁵⁴ See E. Harten and H.C. Harten, *Femmes, culture et révolution* (French edition: Paris, Des Femmes, 1989), chap. 5, esp. pp. 158-61. The concept of 'active' and 'passive' citizens was to become a point of concrete contention with the outbreak of the Revolution itself when, for the first time, large numbers of men were to be included within the body politic and have the right (enshrined in the Declaration of the Rights of Man) to take part in political decision-making. Very few revolutionaries were prepared to see these rights extended to women. For a discussion of how this distinction affected women, see W.H. Sewell, 'Le citoyen/la citoyenne: Activity, Passivity, and the Revolutionary Concept of Citizenship', in Baker (ed.), *The Political Culture of the Old Regime*.

⁵⁵ Condorcet, *Sur l'Admission des femmes au droit de cité*, text in E. Badinter (ed.), *Paroles d'hommes (1790-1793), Condorcet, Prudhomme, Guyomar* (Paris, P.O.L., 1989), pp. 54; 56.