

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

Part I

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‘The civil virtues, that is to say, those virtues which relate to the common good and the advantage of human society, are infinitely better practised by women than by men.’

Caffiaux, *Défences du beau sexe* (1753).

Throughout the eighteenth century a positive obsession existed with the idea of virtue.¹ It was a word with many meanings, but from its earliest manifestation it had been deeply associated with ideals of manhood. It had originated as the Latin term ‘virtus’, derived from the word for a man, ‘vir’, and had meant those qualities which were deemed to be most worthy of man. Originally these were warlike qualities, above all, courage in battle. But for the Romans it had very soon been used to designate also the selfless dedication a man needed in order to be an active citizen in public life. In the classical republican tradition a man of virtue was one who put devotion to the public good before his own self advantage or the interests of his family.

In eighteenth-century France this stern model of classical republican virtue was still very much a current idea. But there were also many competing ideas, or discourses, of virtue which vied for the attention of the reading public, including notions of Christian virtue, noble virtue, and monarchical virtue. Most significantly, from about the middle of the century a new concept had come to prominence. This was the idea of innate natural virtue. This natural virtue manifested itself in social terms. It was argued that all humanity was bound by common ties of sympathy. Such fellow-feeling made people wish to be of active benefit to each other and to help those less fortunate than themselves. This concept was not overtly political, in the sense of the classical republican formulation. But it conveyed the broader notion that men had civil responsibilities for fellow citizens and that their virtue legitimised their participation in public life.

By the early 1750s the outlines of the ‘man of virtue’ had taken shape as an ideal of masculine social and political conduct. As a political model its influence would increase throughout the rest of the century and into the revolutionary period. He was a composite of qualities derived from older ideas of classical republicanism and newer concepts of natural virtue. There was space for

considerable variation within the model, but the main outlines were clear enough. Integrity was his most essential quality. He was independent, open, and 'incorruptible', both in public and in private life. He was a citizen, devoted to his *patrie*, and to his fellow citizens. This devotion was by no means incompatible with his loyalty to the monarchy, but it was based on the assumption that the monarch also served the best interests of the *patrie*. The 'man of virtue' was, like the hero of Mackenzie's novel, a 'man of feeling' (*sensibilité*). His natural impulses were good though he was generally depicted as being able to 'master' his emotions when necessary. He took his familial obligations with the utmost seriousness, and was an exemplary father, son and husband. His image formed a marked contrast with that of the 'aristocratic libertine', or even with the 'man of honour' whose self-esteem derived from his social appearance and prestige.

But sex, of course, made all the difference. A French schoolboy of the educated classes could read about the courageous exploits of Marcus Brutus, or the Gracchi. These were renowned heroes a boy could aspire to model his own behaviour on - at least in their reveries. But his sister was most unlikely to have been allowed much access to the classics, or to have been taught the Latin or Greek needed to read them in the original.² If she did become acquainted with such texts the role models of virtuous women therein were likely to make for depressing reading, hardly heroines one would burn to emulate. The tale of the founding of the Roman republic was based on a woman's virtue, it is true. Lucretia's rape and subsequent suicide provided the initial inspiration for the overthrow of tyranny and establishment of the republic. Lucretia's self-sacrifice was perhaps unlikely to appeal overmuch to girls reading the classics. Women of the ancient classical world generally were of low status and were supposed to stay in the privacy of their homes and leave public virtue to the men. An exception was the Spartan women who dedicated themselves to public virtue by being so unnatural as to exult in the death of their sons for the fatherland and instructed their sons setting off to war. 'Come back with your shield or on it': that is, better dead than a coward. It was hardly a tender portrait of motherhood. French girls were far more likely to be familiar with the Christian tradition. There they would find a different kind of feminine virtue, one achieved primarily through passive suffering. Its inspiration was the anguish of the Madonna, the loving but submissive wife and mother; her sorrows would only be assuaged in heaven.

The nature of women's relationship to virtue presents us with an important,

though complex, set of problems. The politics of virtue dealt mainly with the public world and therefore, by definition, was concerned mostly with the public life of men. But the public realm of political virtue also had its reverse side: exclusion, private life and femininity. Important new work has begun to map out political practice and political theory in terms of distinctions based on gender roles.³ Few subjects in eighteenth-century studies have been as contentious as the relationship between political theory and gender. This debate has been original and illuminating, and the present work is much indebted to new works in this field. But some aspects of the debate have been couched in somewhat anachronistic terms and address present-day concerns which would have held little meaning for people in the eighteenth century. Whilst not at all attempting to deny the interest of such a theoretical approach, the present article takes a slightly different stance. It will seek to examine ideas about women's virtue through the voices of people of the time - both women and men who were concerned with the social and moral position of women. It will seek to explain their ideas in ways which would have had some meaning for people of the time, in their own terms. It is that eighteenth-century understanding of the nature - and social and political potential- of women's virtue that we shall seek to uncover here.

The public face of masculine virtue was based on certain assumptions about the role of women and the complementary qualities which they brought to society. Under absolute monarchy women were almost entirely excluded from political power. There were a very few - but notable - exceptions: one or two royal wives, and certain royal mistresses who had won the trust of the king and whose influence extended beyond the bedroom into court politics and royal patronage. Noblewomen might sometimes be players in the patronage system if circumstances (usually widowhood) had given them control over land and property. For the most part, though, women were conspicuous by their absence both from political practice and political theory. Nor were there any calls before the Revolution for the political enfranchisement of women. In a society where all men but the king were excluded from political rights there was no sense that women needed - or were entitled to - political representation. Those women close to the throne who did exert indirect power were often resented for what was perceived to be a corruption of royal authority. Often the most vitriolic of their attackers were courtiers who felt that they had unjustly been excluded from patronage and honours due to the interference of over-powerful women.⁴ This attitude was very much in line with classical republican traditions of thought whereby women were seen as the antithesis of republican virtue, prone to ignorance and love of luxury and using their seductive wiles to wield excessive

influence over men.

Hostility towards women in public life is most apparent in the treatment of the only women who occupied an official place close to the source of legitimate political authority in the *ancien régime* - the queens of France. Salic law meant no woman could rule in her own right. Queens such as Anne of Austria and, before her, Catherine de Medici who had exercised political power during the minority of their sons, had been bitterly resented for it.⁵ Antagonism towards queens combined two popular prejudices: distrust of women engaging in politics, and suspicion aroused by the presence of a foreign interest at the heart of the French government. The virtues of queens were different in character to those of kings, and the actions of queens had always been more circumscribed and held to be more publicly accountable.⁶

Stanislas, the exiled king of Poland and father-in-law of Louis XV offered conventional advice to his daughter, Marie Leczinska on how to comport herself as queen of France. He stated that the French public, being an 'enlightened people' was the rightful judge of the queen's actions, and could demand of her 'the virtues which it had the right to claim'. A queen's virtues should include her resignation of any ties to her own people. The conduct of politics was also outside her sphere: she should not attempt 'to penetrate the veils which cover the secrets of the state.'⁷ Marie Leczinska attracted public sympathy for the way in which she was seen to conform to this self-effacing model. She was repeatedly said to be a model of queenly or 'humble' virtues. She was devout; she patiently bore with her husband's neglect and repeated infidelity; her chastity was beyond question; she produced royal sons to whom she might impart her own virtues; and finally she went quietly and uncomplainingly into her grave.⁸ In fact, however, she probably had little choice: her potential to have a high political profile at court was severely limited by the fact that her father was, to all intents and purposes, reduced to being little more than Louis XV's pensioner.

During Louis XV's reign, the opprobrium lavished on 'political' women was directed, not against the queen, but against his mistresses; above all, Madame de Pompadour and Madame du Barry. In the anti-monarchical propaganda of the time, whilst Marie Leczinska epitomised queenly virtue: they stood for vice. Indeed, it appears that Marie Leczinska herself actively helped to encourage this identification. Together with her son, the Dauphin, she was a leader of the *dévot* faction at court. As such, despite the strictures against queens 'meddling' in politics, she was not above some discreet political manipulation herself. The *dévot* faction worked to promote the view that Madame de Pompadour in particular was corrupting the political order by exerting an undue influence over the king.

These rumours circulated widely, going beyond court circles into the clandestine press, and shaping popular opinion on the matter. Ironically (for this was hardly the intention of the *dévots*) such rumours tended to undermine respect for the monarch himself.⁹

With Marie-Antoinette it was a different matter. In the clandestine press, and in the minds of the reading public, she was notoriously held to be the very personification of vice in the body politic: the very reverse of the 'humble virtues' of her predecessor. This hostility arose from several causes. It was partly a consequence of continuing suspicion of the Hapsburgs as long-standing enemies of France. It was also the result of Marie-Antoinette's failure to understand the French court so that she recklessly gave offence to leading court nobles. But it was also due to her husband being genuinely devoted to her, and taking no mistresses as his grandfather had done, thus laying himself open to accusations of uxoriousness. In the minds of the public she thus combined the political power of a queen with the sexual power of a mistress.

Her 'queenly vices' were characterised as: sexual infidelity to her husband (and by extension treachery to France), lavish spending, indifference to the sufferings of the poor and oppressed, the furtherance of corruption at court, and interference in politics and the appointment of ministers. There was very little substance in these stories - but in a sense that hardly mattered. John Hardman has argued that in fact Marie-Antoinette took little part in political decision-making until after the political disaster for the monarchy of the Assembly of Notables in 1787. But by that time her image had already been irreversibly damaged in the eyes of the public. Initially the hostile image of Marie-Antoinette was fostered by factions at court who were excluded from the circle of those who had ready access to the king and queen and took revenge for the undoubted ineptness of the royal couple at handling the system of patronage and faction which was the life-blood of the courtier. But the Affair of the Diamond Necklace went far beyond court circles, and appeared to confirm all the rumours about the queen's conspicuous consumption and sexual corruption. More than any other single event, that particular scandal undermined the authority of the monarchy in the eyes of the public. The monarchy emerged from the sorry affair looking either depraved or ludicrous, depending on one's opinion. The issue of the representation of a woman's virtue - or lack of it - was a key factor in undermining traditional respect for monarchical authority in the precarious unstable political context of the later 1780s.¹⁰ For women close to the throne and the source of power, the only kind of acceptable virtue was that of the silent, submissive, chaste, devout and fertile queen.

But the main question we shall address here is the relationship between ordinary women and the politics of virtue. Where women did feature more positively was in broader conceptions of society and their role within it. In the areas of family life, moral example, and philanthropy, the importance of women as a moral force - a force for virtue - was frequently asserted. Although women were supposed to confine themselves to the private sphere and family life, it was often claimed that since the family was the foundation of the wider community, women's private influence had implications for society as a whole.

The question of how women fitted into the premises of political virtue was intensely problematic. Political virtue was presented as a transparent and egalitarian attribute: a quality which was within the compass of every citizen to attain. It was said to demand independence of thought and material circumstances, strength of purpose, clear-sightedness and rational thought - all qualities which were commonly believed to be the province of men alone. The ideal of the virtuous citizen was not constituted from an objective political category; rather, it was grounded in contemporary perceptions of what it meant to be a man. The concept of masculine virtue cannot be understood in isolation from its feminine counterpart: each set the boundaries, strengths and limitations of the other. Male political public virtue could be enabled and facilitated by the notion that the virtue of women consisted in upholding the private sphere, in tending to their homes, children and family life, and in maintaining the respectability of their house through exemplary chastity. Contemporary notions of femininity provided a counterpoint to the traditional concept of civic virtue; femininity served as a contrast which emphasised the manliness, strength and legitimacy of civic virtue.

We need, therefore, to consider how political virtue was mediated by conceptions of gender, conceptions which were played out around the parallel themes of masculine and feminine, public and private, and vice and virtue. In particular, we will examine a variety of models of female virtue for what they can tell us about the ways in which the relationship between women and the political realm was constructed and debated. It has been argued with some force that the discourse of virtue marginalised the political role of women.¹¹ Because women were cut off, both from formal political structures and from political theory, ideas about women must be sought in alternative sources: works such as novels, conduct books, and tracts on education, all of which featured some very contrasting models of virtuous femininity.

Part of the difficulty, of course, is that there were different ways of speaking about virtue which stemmed from very different traditions of thought. Discourses of Christian virtue, classical republican virtue, and natural virtue, all varied in their portrayal of the relationship between the respective roles of the sexes *vis à vis* the wider community. The idea most often invoked was that, just as men and women were different in character, so masculine and feminine virtue were also inherently different. But since there was by no means agreement as to the nature of masculinity and femininity, so also there was not always a consensus as to the exact nature and extent of women's capacity for virtue. According to the more misogynist commentators, feminine virtue was puny and weak. Their most prized virtue was their chastity - and even in this respect women were constantly in need of supervision for they were all too susceptible to seduction. Other commentators took a contrasting view and saw feminine virtue as a positive attribute in its own right, a moral and spiritual purity which extended far beyond the physical boundaries of chastity. Its character was complementary to that of masculine virtue, but was confined within the domestic or private sphere. In addition, we shall see that it was occasionally argued that virtue did not vary according to gender, and that masculine and feminine virtue were essentially the same moral quality.

In the remainder of this article I shall outline the traditional parameters of feminine virtue concentrating on the first half of the century. In a second article I will go on to examine the impact of new ideas of natural virtue which emerged from about the mid-century. The traditional meaning of virtue as a manly quality made the idea of a 'virtuous woman' almost a contradiction in terms. A woman who aspired to virtue might find herself described in unappealing and disparaging terms as a 'virago', signifying a woman who had transgressed the natural boundaries of gender and become too much like a man for her own good. There would seem then on the face of it to have been little scope for women to claim the rhetoric of virtue for themselves. But in practice there was a surprising degree of flexibility in the meanings imparted to feminine virtue and their social significance.

Certain key ideas about the virtues of women in the eighteenth century had roots in the complex traditions of classical antiquity. The link between female chastity and the maintenance of the social order went back at least as far as the Romans although they generally kept the term 'virtus' exclusively for public masculine virtue, and used a separate word for female chastity, 'pudicitia'. Thus for the Romans, if not for their eighteenth-century readers, chastity was not the

exact feminine equivalent of manly virtue. Amongst the Romans a woman's virtue was held to consist partly in her chastity, but also in loyalty to her husband, and devotion to her children. Of these virtues, the highest was loyalty to a husband. Female adultery was designated a public offence by the Emperor Augustus notwithstanding the fact that he himself was a notable adulterer. He stated that the decline of Roman society was the inevitable consequence of women taking lovers. Indeed it was a perennial theme among Roman authors to lament the decline of moral standards amongst their people and attribute this to the sexual incontinence of Roman women. By contrast, the historian Tacitus in his account of the German tribes attributed much of their warlike strength to the formidable chastity of their women: a chastity which, unlike that of Roman ladies, was not subjected to the temptations afforded by social occasions such as dinner parties.¹² On the rare occasions when women of the German tribes weakened and succumbed to lovers' blandishments, they were publicly whipped and disgraced. Military strength - and thus male virtue - stemmed from a man being able to rely on the fidelity of his wife. The archetypal classical republican model of virtuous femininity was the mother of republican heroes, typified by Cornelia, mother of the Gracchi: because she had learned virtue herself she was able to teach it to her children. But the most positive view of women's virtue amongst the classical authors came from Plutarch. In his essay on the 'Bravery of Women' (*Mulierum Virtutes*) he stated his disagreement with the idea that the most virtuous woman is she who is least talked about, that is, she who remains chaste in the home and does not play any kind of part in public affairs. On the contrary, Plutarch said, 'man's virtues and woman's virtues are one and the same' and he went on to give examples to prove his case.¹³ But this position was rarely adopted either in the classical world or amongst eighteenth-century commentators.

The Christian legacy was equally complex and influential. Christian beliefs about the moral virtue of women were complex and often ambiguous. For traditional Church patriarchs, the moral strength of women was highly suspect, a view dating back to Eve, the original transgressor and temptress of man. On the other hand the idea that the moral virtue of men and women was equal (at least in potential) also had a strong basis in Christian thought. In 1596, Alexandre de Pont-Aymery sought to demonstrate in his *Paradoxe apologique* that '...woman has achieved a much higher level of perfection than man in every act of virtue'; whilst in 1618, the Chevalier de l'Escale in *Le Champion des femmes* claimed that women were more perfect, more noble and more virtuous than men.¹⁴ This ideal recalled the Virgin Mary, rather than the fallible Eve. She was capable of the purest virtue, but it was based on a mother's love for her children and did not translate easily

into a public role. Such virtue was as humble as it was pure.

The belief in woman as the source of moral purity depended on her maintenance of her sexual purity. The basis of a woman's moral virtue, therefore, was her chastity (*la pudeur*). The identification of the word virtue with feminine chastity came relatively late into the dictionaries, from about 1700, although it was in common use for some considerable time before that date. Chastity was commonly held to be the most fundamental of feminine virtues. Chastity was not normally seen as an essential virtue for men in the same way, the only exception being the formal obligation for men in holy orders to embrace celibacy in their vows. Occasionally more radical clerics did insist in their sermons that chastity was as vital for men as it was for women, and for devout Catholics this conferred a serious obligation in terms of their duty to God.¹⁵ But the double standard was firmly entrenched in every aspect of more worldly society. There were no effective social penalties against a man who transgressed sexually in the way that there were for women. He would find admittance everywhere, even if his reputation for dissolute behaviour was public knowledge.

In almost every text on women's virtue in this period it was claimed, or simply assumed, that a woman's most essential virtue was her chastity, or at least the *appearance* of chastity, the latter being in some ways even more essential than the former. Women writers were less likely to challenge this convention than were men, for the penalties for transgression were theirs alone. Without chastity no woman from the 'respectable' classes, could hope to enjoy a secure social position. The only women who could afford to flout this convention were those from the poorest classes (who were not part of the reading public and therefore outside this debate) and women from the highest elite, the court nobility, and those who moved in the most exclusive Paris circles. For a woman of the higher classes to engage in a liaison was not considered nearly so shocking or immoral as to flaunt the fact publicly. For such women, the most vital virtue was discretion. It was very difficult for women writers not to conform to conventional ideas about feminine virtue as chastity in their writings, even if their private lives told a different story.

Madame de Genlis offered a notable instance of this flexible attitude. She was infamous for having had a liaison with the duc de Chartres (later d'Orléans) and was widely believed to have borne him a daughter, though her husband took a properly complacent attitude. In later years she became governess to Chartres' children and took on a public role as an author of works on education, which was one of the few respectable careers available to women. Her books, however, were far more conventional than her life. Like many others, she wrote a book in praise

of virtue, her *Annales de la vertu* for the edification of young minds, wherein she solemnly informed her readers that adultery was a far more heinous offence for women than it was for men, especially if a woman attempted to pass off a lover's child as her husband's.¹⁶ Like so many educational tracts, the *Annales de la vertu* consisted of morally-improving examples of virtue from history. Madame de Genlis argued that such a book was all the more necessary since Plutarch's *Lives*, though so instructive a book, contained many stories unsuitable for young persons.¹⁷ Amongst the anecdotes that she considered suitable for sensitive young girls was an account of young Chinese girls who drowned themselves rather than suffer 'a fate worse than death' at the hands of the emperor; whilst another story recounted how, at the taking of Acre in 1291, the sisters of the convent of Sainte-Claire mutilated themselves so as to avoid rape by the Saracens.¹⁸ By contrast, her stories about boys and men concentrated much more on concrete achievements such as military victories and building cities, though loyalty, filial piety and generosity to the poor also figured strongly. In many respects her account was a typical rendering of standard models of male and female virtue.

The ideal of the 'honest woman' (*honnête femme*) - a classic model for feminine conduct in the first half of the century - was based on notions of respectable, restrained behaviour. An *honnête femme* was a woman who bowed to social constraints and did not openly struggle against the values of 'the world'. Like the *honnête homme* (her male equivalent) she sprang from the court, and the most elevated Parisian circles. Her virtue was concerned with the morality of the individual, inner peace and tranquillity, rather than with virtue as a social or active quality. The key point about her virtue was its moderation. This attitude is illustrated in Madame de Châtelet's *Traité de bonheur* (1748 though not published till 1779 after her death and that of her former lover, Voltaire). Unlike later writers, she had relatively little to say about virtue. She saw moral virtue as a necessary ingredient for happiness, but it was a discreet, inconspicuous quality, one that did not offend society by embracing extremes: '...one has to be at ease with oneself ... and it is vain to hope to enjoy this satisfaction without virtue'.¹⁹ By happiness she meant the achievement of personal tranquillity and equilibrium. Despite being an intensely intellectual woman, a mathematician and physicist, she was still subject to the constrictions society placed upon her sex. The most poignant passages of her book dwelt on how women might keep their dignity whilst coping with the grief of unhappy love affairs and faithless lovers.

Such an emphasis on the *appearance* of morality frequently encouraged the kind of cynicism we encounter in the writing of Madame de Puisieux, a member

of the salon world of the *philosophes*, and for some time a mistress of Diderot. She wrote with a lightly ironical touch about society's double standards and how they obliged women to become devious and adopt stratagems in order to do as they wished whilst appearing to acquiesce. In her *Conseils à une Amie*, she wrote that a woman's conduct must conform to the requirements of 'the world', and that one must live, 'if not with virtue, at least with the appearance of it.'²⁰ She suggested that rather than trying to fight society's conventions, it was in women's best interests to accept a situation they could not alter but to ensure that they manipulated it to their advantage. In *Les Caractères*, she compiled her alternative version of a 'good conduct' book, by which she meant worldly rather than virtuous conduct and illustrated the difference by recounting the following anecdote:

Someone asked one day at a social gathering which was the virtue most necessary to us; almost all the women were of the opinion that it was chastity; but one replied, 'you deceive yourselves, it is discretion. I am sixty years old, and I have the reputation of being chaste: only I know whether my reputation is deserved.' This frankness ended the debate; they considered that the woman who had spoken was justified by experience, and no one thought any the less of her virtue.²¹

Such worldly cynicism was in the salon style typified by La Rochefoucauld. There was little place here for the idea of authentic virtue; indeed, it was a concept which appeared faintly ridiculous:

Happy is he who possesses virtue in moderation. I have noticed that people who take virtue to excess are simply unbearable both to themselves and to others. I have also noticed that no one envies you for your virtues....

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The contrast between such sceptical attitudes towards feminine virtue, and the vogue for 'authentic' virtue in the 1770s and 1780s is striking. When, many years later, that earnest young republican, Madame Roland encountered the now aged Madame de Puisieux so redolent of an older and supposedly frivolous generation, she wrote in shocked tones of how disillusioned she had been by the meeting, and pointedly exclaimed that a woman so lacking in decency should never have written about morality.²³

But if women were concerned only with maintaining the appearance of virtue, was this a consequence of innate female shallowness and incapacity for

moral integrity, or rather, was it because a more positive role was closed off from them so that they were obliged to confine themselves to social trivia? This was a question which taxed both male and female moralists. No less an authority than Fénelon had argued that there was a direct link between the education of girls and the public good. He endorsed the view that women should not play a direct role in public life and should immerse themselves within family life, but he argued that the family itself was directly linked to the good of the wider community. From this he concluded that it was no less important to teach virtue to girls than it was for boys. The female version would be different in character, befitting their contrasting roles, but its ultimate aim was to instil morality and a sense of social usefulness. He justified this view through the Christian doctrine of equality of souls, rather than in terms of classical republicanism.

These then are the occupations of women, which are hardly less important to the public than those of men, because women have a house to run, a husband to make happy, children to bring up well. Let us add that virtue is no less important to women than to men; without speaking of the good or bad that they can do in the public world, they are half the human race, saved by the blood of Jesus Christ and destined for eternal life.²⁴

The ideal of the *honnête femme* found one of its most eloquent spokeswomen in Madame de Lambert. Writing in the moralist tradition of the earlier part of the century, she brought to the subject an acute awareness of the differences in the ways in which society understood morality for men and for women. She herself was from the *noblesse de robe*. She was early left a widow and had been obliged to bring up her children in relatively straitened financial circumstances and amidst perpetual lawsuits. Though famous for her salon, which boasted many of the most distinguished men of her day including Montesquieu, Fontenelle and Marivaux, she was acutely aware that at every level society closed off opportunities for women. In a private letter she confided bitter thoughts, 'I have never thought, monsieur, that I would be anything but ignored, or that I had any choice but to stay in the nothingness to which it pleases men to restrict us.'²⁵ She accepted what she felt could not be altered and proved hesitant to publish her own creative efforts as a writer; her works only began to appear in print in the 1720s. She considered that the emphasis on chastity at all costs was one of the ways in which men forced women into social subordination and the private sphere. But she was not content to see this as the only virtue women could achieve. She explored the idea of male and female virtue through her writings on the education of her own children. She accepted that there were differences; but

for both sexes she saw virtue as an essential quality, based on inner integrity. For her son she envisaged the classic career for a boy of his rank, as a military officer and leader of men. In her *Avis d'une Mère à son Fils* (1726) she wrote that for a boy of his class everyone agreed that the most important virtues were military; virtues that would lead a young man to glory and public renown. But military virtues alone were not enough to constitute a hero. 'The idea of a Hero is incompatible with the idea of a man without justice, without probity, and without greatness of soul. It is not enough to have the honour that comes from social worth, the honour that comes from probity is just as important. All the virtues must be united in order to make a hero.'²⁶ Nor did wealth or luxury make for virtue, 'riches have never imparted Virtue...'²⁷ She warned her son that it was virtue rather than noble birth which gave a man the right to lead others. Without virtue, she said, 'You are a usurper of authority ... In an Empire where Reason ruled everyone would be equal and there would be no social distinctions but those of Virtue.'²⁸ Despite these admonitions, her intention was to give her son confidence in his right to exercise public virtues through a military career.

When she turned to the education of girls in the *Avis d'une Mère à sa Fille* (1728) there was a dramatic difference in tone. Girls had been unfairly neglected. They too had an important role to play in the world, and should have the appropriate education to fit them for their task in life. Women played a pivotal role as wives, mothers, and educators of young children. Virtue was as important for girls as for boys and it entailed far more than chastity. Certainly chastity was expected of a girl, because 'the world' required it of her, but also because of 'conscience', and for Madame de Lambert, it was the inner voice of conscience that mattered more than public opinion.²⁹ Not for girls, however, the glory and renown of masculine virtue. 'The glamorous virtues are not the lot of women; they content themselves with the simple and quiet virtues. Renown does not concern itself with us,' she wrote wistfully. But far from concluding that this meant that woman's virtue was of less value than that of men she thought it an even greater achievement. 'Women's virtues are hard to sustain, because glory does not smooth the path to attaining them. Confine yourself to your home; busy yourself with your family and your own affairs; be simple, just and modest; these are painful virtues because they are hidden in obscurity. It needs a great deal of merit to flee public renown, and a great deal of courage to consent to be virtuous only in your own sight.'³⁰

It followed that women should have the same moral virtue as men. 'An *honnête Femme* has the same virtues as Men; friendship, probity, responsibility towards her duties.'³¹ But women's education had been neglected. Girls, like

boys, should be taught to be thinking moral beings. Girls should learn practical sciences, morals, philosophy, Latin (but no Italian, this being 'the language of love' and dangerous for young girls), history, and the classics, for it was in the classical authors that girls would find examples of public virtue.³² But Madame de Lambert's view of virtue was still very much in the mould of traditional moral writing and imbued with pessimism about the possibilities open to women. Her emphasis was on building inner resources, strength of mind, individual integrity and the construction of a moral self in the face of a hostile world. It did not stretch beyond to the sphere of social virtue.

There is a curious paradox in the fact that women were, on the one hand, excluded from public acts of virtue, whilst, on the other hand, their virtue was considered to be very much a matter of public judgement. The public reputation of a woman's husband and children rested on her chastity. Masculine public virtue claimed for itself the right to be spoken about, to attract glory. Women's virtue was measured insofar as women were not talked about. Because so much emphasis was laid upon the appearance of virtue it could seem at times as though women were being encouraged to practice deception more than genuine virtue.

We can examine this problem in more detail by comparing attitudes towards two famous examples of feminine virtue; one in the classical republican repertoire, the other in the Christian tradition. These are Lucretia and Susannah. The former, surprised in her bed at night by Tarquinius, son of the last Roman king, whose ambition it was to seduce a woman with an unrivalled reputation for virtue, at first tried to fight him off. What finally overcame Lucretia's resistance was his threat to kill not only her but also his slave, then leave the two bodies naked in her bed and claim that he had caught them in the act of adultery and so slew them. It would thus be assumed - by her husband and the world - that she had been unfaithful to her husband and, even more shamefully, that her lover had been a slave. Unable to bear the thought that the world would pass judgement on her, Lucretia ceased to struggle. But afterwards she avenged herself by committing suicide in front of her husband, father and Junius Brutus to wipe out the shame of rape with her blood, having first made the men swear to destroy Tarquinius. Lucretia thus precipitated the destruction of the Roman monarchy and the founding of the Republic. But it could be said that she represented a negative model, for she provoked public action whilst taking no part in it herself. Her only action was to turn death on herself as the only way of 'proving' that she was virtuous, that is, that she had not consented to the rape.³³

Lucretia's action provoked a great deal of hostile comment from Christian

theologians for appearing to advocate self-destruction. One of the most thoughtful discussions of this subject appeared in the moralist, Champdevaux's *L'Honneur considéré en lui-même* (1752) an extended discussion of false honour which was compared unfavourably with 'true' honour, or virtue.³⁴ He contrasted the actions of Lucretia with those of the Biblical heroine, Susannah. As recounted in the Apocrypha, Susannah, when similarly threatened with rape by the hypocritical Elders, resisted their attempts at seduction. They offered her the choice either that she would submit to them and keep her public reputation intact, or that they would make a false accusation that she was unchaste, thus exposing her to public vilification and death. She chose the latter - though Daniel saved her at the last moment. Champdevaux claimed that Susannah was more truly virtuous than Lucretia for she had preferred to risk public shame and death rather than lose her true virtue. By contrast, Lucretia had finally acquiesced to the loss of her chastity out of fear of being thought not chaste.

Susannah resists the importunities of the elders because of her love of virtue, Lucretia gives in to Tarquinius for fear of what people will think about her if he carries out his threats.³⁵

Champdevaux admitted that Lucretia's choice seemed at first sight more impressive, in that she chose her own time and place to die; she was not to be put to death as a criminal. Moreover, she died surrounded by those who loved her and were aware of her innocence, and she had first ensured that her death would be avenged. Susannah would have had no such comfort but, according to Champdevaux, this made her action the more moral. She had chosen genuine virtue rather than the public appearance of a virtuous woman. Her vindication would be in God's eyes, and in her own conscience, not in public opinion. Susannah's story epitomised the ideal of the Christian woman who mutely suffers temporal injustice. Her virtue would not help the people around her, including those she most cared about; it would not help even herself. But her virtue would result in her soul's ultimate salvation. In the meantime her example offered consolation and a kind of empowerment to the devout by claiming that the difficulties and injustices which were the frequent lot of women's lives were known to God: he at least recognised and valued their moral worth. Champdevaux's account was notable not only because it was framed as a contrast between pagan and Christian models of feminine virtue, but also because he claimed that social appearances were not integral to authentic feminine virtue. He used this model of authentic feminine Christian virtue as an example of 'true honour' to illustrate how morally inadequate was the courtly version of 'false

honour' based on appearances. As so often, women's chastity stood for the moral health of society as a whole.

From about the middle of the century the model of the *honnête femme* began to fall out of favour. She appeared to stand too much for the court and courtly standards of behaviour which were being increasingly associated with lack of true integrity. It is significant that when in 1748, François-Vincent Toussaint published *Les Moeurs*, his key work on the social importance of natural virtue, he made a point of dedicating it not to a man of high rank and social standing, as was customary, but to a woman (identified as Madame M.A. T.***), whose social rank was the same as his own but who was, he said, the embodiment of virtue in human form.³⁶ Here a woman provided a model of virtue which contained within itself sufficient moral legitimacy to challenge the moral authority that had previously clung to rank and privilege. Significantly, women's virtue was depicted as morally superior to the advantages that came with birth. Toussaint attacked the ideal of the *honnête femme* (much as elsewhere he criticised the courtly notion of the *honnête homme*). He was particularly scathing about the complacent belief that in order to be virtuous a woman had only to be faithful to her husband. In one of his coded references to a woman of high social rank, an '*honnête femme*' whom he called 'Thémire', he criticised the narrow code of values which she espoused and called virtue:

... she thought that chastity takes the place of all the virtues; and that a woman can be termed 'good' so long as she is faithful to her husband, even though she be moody and nagging, tyrannises her children and harangues the servants, sneers at people and maligns them, and cheats at card games. By modelling your behaviour on hers you will no doubt be honest women: but will you be women of merit?³⁷

Chastity and respectability were not a substitute for virtue. The *honnête femme* appeared cold and without feeling; she had stifled that natural sensibility which would give her social virtue. A new kind of virtuous woman was about to take her place.

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

¹ For a full-length consideration of the politics of virtue, see M. Linton, *The Politics of Virtue in Enlightenment France* (Palgrave Press, forthcoming, 2001).

² School education for girls was generally both much briefer in duration and much more superficial than that accorded to boys. The overwhelming emphasis was on religious instruction and on forming future wives and mothers. Neither the classics nor Enlightenment ideas were much in evidence: to learn about such subjects girls would probably have had to resort to private study. On school education in the Paris region, see M. Sonnet, *L'Éducation des filles au temps des Lumières* (Paris, Editions du Cerf, 1987).

³ A pioneering study in this respect was J.W. Scott, 'Gender, a Useful Category of Historical Analysis', *American Historical Review*, 91 (1986), pp. 1053-75.

⁴ One of the most notorious accounts was that attributed to Pidansat de Mairobert, *Anecdotes sur Madame la Comtesse Dubarri* (Amsterdam, 1776). This work enjoyed immense popularity: Darnton states it was the equivalent of an eighteenth-century 'best-seller', see R. Darnton, *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* (London, HarperCollins, 1996).

⁵ On the language of the Mazarinades, see Christian Jouhaud, *Mazarinades: La Fronde des mots* (Paris, Aubier, 1985).

⁶ On the virtues of kingship, see M. Linton, 'The Unvirtuous King? Clerical Rhetoric on the French Monarchy, 1760 - 1774', *History of European Ideas*, 25 (1999), pp. 55-74.

⁷ See Stanislas's *Avis du Roi à la Reine sa Fille lors de son Mariage*, in the work published under his name, Stanislas Leczinski, *Oeuvres du philosophe bienfaisant*, 4 vols (Paris, F.L.C. Marin, 1763), I, esp. pp. 1,3,21-2.

⁸ A characteristic treatment of the 'humble virtues' of the long-suffering wife of Louis XV was given in her funeral oration by Boismont, *Oraison funèbre de très-haute, très-puissante et très-excellente Princesse Marie Leczinska, Reine de France. Prononcé dans la chapelle du Louvre, le 22 novembre 1768, en présence de Messieurs de l'Académie française*, republished in J.P. Migne, *Collection intégrale et universelle des orateurs sacrés*, 96 vols (Paris, 1844-66), vol. 65, esp. pp. 814-6.

⁹ See T.E. Kaiser, 'Madame de Pompadour and the Theaters of Power', *French Historical Studies*, 19 (1996), pp. 1025-44.

¹⁰ On representations of Marie-Antoinette see in particular: L. Hunt, *The Family Romance of the French Revolution* (London, Routledge, 1992), chap. 4; J. Revel, 'Marie-Antoinette in her fictions: the staging of hatred' in B. Fort (ed.),

Fictions of the French Revolution (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1991), pp. 111-29. On the political impact of the Diamond Necklace affair, see A. Cobban, 'The Affair of the Diamond Necklace', in Cobban, *Aspects of the French Revolution* (St Albans, Paladin, 1971), and more recently, S. Maza, 'The Diamond Necklace Affair Revisited (1785-1786): The Case of the Missing Queen', in L. Hunt (ed.), *Eroticism and the Body Politic* (Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 1991). On the queen's actual role in court politics see J. Hardman, *French Politics, 1774-1789, From the Accession of Louis XVI to the Fall of the Bastille* (Longman, 1995), pp. 198-215.

¹¹ There have been several influential studies which have addressed the question of the political meanings of gendered concepts of virtue during the period of the French Revolution. Amongst these one should note in particular: J.B. Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* (Cornell University Press, 1988); D. Outram, 'Le langage mâle de la vertu: Women and the Discourse of the French Revolution', in P. Burke and R. Porter (eds), *The Social History of Language* (Cambridge University Press, 1987); Outram, *The Body and the French Revolution* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1989); C. Blum, *Rousseau and the Republic of Virtue* (Cornell University Press, 1986), pp. 204-15. Both Landes and Outram see revolutionary politics as being constructed against, rather than simply without, women, and argue that a gendered concept of virtue was central to that process. T. Akkerman, *Women's Vices, Public Benefits. Women and Commerce in the French Enlightenment* (Amsterdam, Het Spinhuis, 1992) gives a more nuanced picture of the ways in which the gendered politics of virtue were negotiated. For a subtle and illuminating case-study of the interplay of politics, virtue and gender, see S. Maza, 'The Rose-Girl of Salency: Representations of Virtue in Prerevolutionary France', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 22, 3 (Spring 1989), pp. 395-412. On the Revolution also there is S. P. Conner, 'Public Virtue and Public Women: Prostitution in Revolutionary Paris, 1793-1794', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 28,2 (1994-95), pp. 221-40. Conner looks beyond the Jacobins' rhetoric on prostitution to their policies, which were more complex and more flexible. For an instructive comparison with the American political tradition, one should consult R.H. Bloch, 'The Gendered Meanings of Virtue in Revolutionary America', *Signs*, 13,1 (1987), pp. 37-58.

¹²Tacitus, *Germania*, trans. William Peterson (London, Heineman, 1920), pp. 275-7, 289-93.

¹³ Plutarch, *Moralia*, trans. Frank Cole Babbitt, 15 vols (London, Heineman, 1961), III, pp. 475-9.

¹⁴ Cited in C. Michael (ed.), *Les Tracts féministes au XVIIIe siècle* (Geneva, Slatkine, 1986), Introduction, pp. 10-11.

¹⁵ See for example the sermon made before the court on 'Christian chastity' by the abbé Beauvais in 1773. J.B.C.M. de Beauvais, 'Sur la pudeur', in *Oeuvres complètes de Messire Jean-Baptiste-Charles-Marie de Beauvais, évêque de Senes*, reprinted in Migne, *Des orateurs sacrés*, vol. 71, esp. cols. 292-3, 301.

¹⁶ 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), II, pp. 91-2, esp. footnote 1.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, I, Preface.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, I, p. 89.

¹⁹ G.E. de Breteuil du Châtelet (marquise du), *Discours sur le bonheur* (1779; critical edition edited by R. Mauzi, Paris, Société d'Édition 'Les Belles lettres', 1961).

²⁰ M. A. Puisieux, *Conseils à une Amie, par Madame de P**** (1749), 'Discours préliminaire', pp. v-vi.

²¹ Puisieux, *Les Caracteres par Madame de P**** (London, 1750), pp. 124-5.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 64.

²³ M.J. Roland (né Phlipon), *Mémoires de Madame Roland*, Paul de Roux (ed.), (Paris, 1966), p. 193.

²⁴ Fénelon, *De l'Éducation des Filles*, in *Oeuvres*, 2 vols (Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1983), I, pp. 92-93.

²⁵ Cited in M.J. Fassiotto, *Madame de Lambert: ou le féminisme moral* (New York, Peter Lang, 1984), p. 35.

²⁶ A.T. Lambert (marquise de), *Avis d'une Mère à son Fils*, in *Oeuvres de Madame la Marquise de Lambert* (Amsterdam, 1758), pp. 2-3; 6.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

²⁹ *Avis d'une Mère à sa Fille*, *ibid.*, p. 62; 65-6.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 63-4.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 80-83.

³³ On changing representations of Lucretia's action see I. Donaldson, *The Rapes of Lucretia: a Myth and its Transformations* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1982).

³⁴ Champdevaux, *L'Honneur considéré en lui-même et relativement au duel, où l'on démontre que l'honneur n'a rien de commun avec le duel, et que le duel ne prouve rien pour l'honneur*, par M. de C*** (Paris, P.A. Le Prieur, 1752), pp. 111-25.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

³⁶ F.V. Toussaint, *Les Moeurs* (N.p., 1748; new edition, Amsterdam, 1749, republished, Farnborough, Gregg International, 1972), dedication, pp. iv-v. See also Linton, *The Politics of Virtue*, chap. 2.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 'Discours préliminaire sur la vertu', p. xxii.