Indiana University Arts & Humanities Initiative

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*Enlightened Labor and Artful Maternity:*
*Women of Arts and Letters in France, 1770-1820*

**Brief Description**

Taking up the challenge issued by Virginia Woolf in the early years of this century, feminist scholars have discovered that Shakespeare did indeed have a sister who wrote volumes. The last twenty-five years have seen a virtual explosion of edited editions, monographs and articles by and about women writers, artists, mid-wives, prostitutes, politicians and actresses. Once all this material was re-discovered, re-edited, re-circulated, the question of its relationship to other critical traditions needed to be posed. Historian Joan W. Scott’s 1988 article on gender as an “analytical category” skillfully articulated the stakes involved in writing women’s history. Her article encouraged scholars to explore how feminist analyses not only added more information to the historical record, but also how such investigations might fundamentally change the terms of long-standing intellectual debates. My work represents a continuation of this inquiry. I tackle the specific question of how to assess and analyze the work of women of extraordinary accomplishments whose politics we find unsettling. What approach or strategy should a feminist critic adopt when confronted with the “conservative” attitudes of her subjects of study? In other words, is there room for difference in the feminist ranks?

Simone de Beauvoir once complained that “Madame Vigée-Lebrun never wearied of putting her smiling maternity on her canvases.” (p. 707) While Vigée-Lebrun did indeed seek to render *la tendresse maternelle* as natural and timeless as the seasons, historians have shown that this idealized maternity was very much an invention of the eighteenth century. Early-modern
science and literature colluded to produce a new woman whose primary aim in life would be the biological and moral reproduction of the species. This is by now a familiar story. Yet, the connection between Enlightenment and these new technologies of selfhood, specifically as they relate to women, has yet to be made. Historian Roger Chartier recently urged that the Enlightenment be understood as "the multiple practices guided by an interest in utility and service that aimed at the management of spaces and populations whose mechanisms . . . imposed a profound reorganization of the systems of perception and of the order of the social world." (p. 17) If "utility" and "service" are viewed as central categories of Enlightenment, then the role of the mother as moral center, educator of children and supervisor of the home should not be underestimated. The mother was, in fact, placed at the center of a new familial constellation which represented a profound re-ordering of the social world. The emergence of such discourse lent itself easily to elaboration by women artists and writers.

My book-length study examines the works of the novelist, educator and pedagogical theorist Stéphanie Félicité Ducrest de Genlis (1746-1830), the pre-eminent portrait painter Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun (1755-1842), and the epistolary writer, memorialist and Revolutionary heroine Marie-Jeanne Roland (1754-1793). Despite their immense creative output and historical significance, all three of these figures have proven difficult to enshrine within a feminist canon. Mary Sheriff’s recent monograph on Vigée Lebrun certainly attempted to rectify this problem; but the fact that there is only one modern book on this extremely important female artist points to the unease of critics. Similarly, while Roland’s work has generated a good deal of scholarly ink, it has also produced considerable anxiety about her commitment to Rousseauvian notions of domesticity. Genlis, the first woman in Europe appointed to be the official tutor of royal princes (one of whom would later become King Louis-Philippe) as well as a prolific and popular novelist, has received scant critical attention. The neglect or under-appreciation of these figures can be traced to their embrace of a politics of femininity linked to, if not dependent upon, motherhood. All three figures owe much of their success to an artful use of "maternal affect" that touched the hearts and souls of their contemporaries. It is precisely the rhetorical and visual construction of *tendresse maternelle*, found so moving by generations of viewers and readers, that I seek to explain.
Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s novel *La Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761) and his pedagogical treatise *Emile* (1762) were credited by his contemporaries for having established the terms of the debate about gender in France in the second-half of the eighteenth century. Whether one agreed or disagreed with him, it was henceforth impossible to ignore his pronouncements concerning the “weaker sex.” Accordingly, women writers and artists entered into a dialogue with this important and paradoxical figure of the Enlightenment. All too frequently, however, modern-day debates about Rousseau and the women who admired him have been couched in terms of resistance, inevitably shadowed by the specter of collaboration. Indeed, the feminist critique of the Enlightenment tends to generate certain unproductive dichotomies whereby history is divided into two unequal parts: critics embrace the dream of a female-centered culture, often represented by the wise and witty salonnière, but they reject Rousseauvian domesticity considered insipid and demeaning for women. The world that Genlis, Vigée-Lebrun and Roland inhabited was significantly more complex than this simplistic binary opposition suggests.

My analysis is thus doubly motivated. I want to bring the question of gender more forcefully to bear on the concept of Enlightenment. For far too long, as cultural historian Dena Goodman has persuasively argued, the debates about the French Enlightenment have remained impervious to questions of gender. It is my hope to reveal, not a radically new or separate Enlightenment, but a somewhat different one; one that can account for the contributions of its prominent female practitioners. I also seek to expand and complicate feminist historiography. In using the resources of Enlightenment, Genlis, Roland and Vigée-Lebrun recast the contemporary understanding of femininity to include the story of a self-possessed, heroic and intelligent mother who would endure the vicissitudes of the French Revolution only to be eclipsed by the advent of Modernity.

I have completed two of the five chapters of my book. (An article based on a portion of my chapter on Roland will appear in the foremost journal in my field *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, spring 2001). I am currently an alternate at the National Humanities Center (see attached) and, if awarded funding, would be able to finish the manuscript—the remaining three chapters—while in residence for the academic year of 2001-2002 at the Center. I would complete the book by summer 2002 and would send it to a major university press soon thereafter.
Budget

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<th>Grant Request</th>
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<tr>
<td>50% PI academic year salary</td>
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<td>Fringe Benefits @ 35.32%</td>
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Total Project Costs $ 

Letter of support from Division Dean: attached.
Letter of support from an expert in the field: attached
Curriculum vitae: attached