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Author(s): Natania Meeker

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**“All times are present to her”:
Femininity, Temporality, and
Libertinage in Diderot’s “Sur les
femmes”**

Natania Meeker

Denis Diderot begins his essay, “Sur les femmes” (“On Women”), with a declaration of affection for another man: “J’aime Thomas” (“I love Thomas”; [949]), he proclaims. Diderot goes on to skewer his acquaintance Antoine-Léonard Thomas for the arid prose, lack of wit, and excessive impartiality of his *Essai sur le caractère, les moeurs, et l’esprit des femmes dans les différents siècles*—a treatise to which “Sur les femmes” styles itself as a response. Nonetheless, this initial faux-naïf declaration of tender masculine solidarity seems appropriate in a text whose unrelenting focus is sexual difference as figured in and by women.¹ “Sur les femmes” presents an unsystematic but extensive catalogue of the many modes of feminine alterity—among them those of the hysteric, the prostitute, “la dévote” (“devout woman”), the virgin, the mother, the savage, the prude, and the libertine. In his portrayal of the *mystère* that is woman in all her variety, Diderot vacillates between a tone of airy sentimentality—“Quand on écrit des femmes, il faut tremper sa plume dans l’arc-en-ciel et jeter sur sa ligne la poussière des ailes du papillon” (“When one writes about women, one must dip one’s pen in the rainbow and sprinkle on one’s writing the dust from butterfly wings” [957])—and one imbued with

moral sanctimony—"Quel sera le frein d'une femme déshonorée à ses yeux et aux yeux de ses concitoyens?" ("What will hold back a woman who has been dishonored in her own eyes as well as in those of her fellow citizens?" [959]). Throughout, he is committed to a (familiar) vision of femininity as naturally marked by difference—a difference emblemized in the image of the uterus, "un organe susceptible de spasmes terribles, disposant d'elle" ("an organ, prone to terrible spasms, which controls her" [952]). Women, according to Diderot, can only be superficially acculturated, and suffer from the consequences of a necessarily incomplete integration into the sphere of the social.² They evoke earlier stages of human development—the eras of the savage and the child. Yet, with their characteristic focus on matters of wit and style, women ultimately serve as pleasant inspiration for a community of male authors. "Sur les femmes" begins and ends with references to intellectual exchange between men. The examination of women's ineluctable otherness provides a crucial context for the cultivation of enlightened masculine sociability.

Diderot's lively discussion of the "sexe faible" participates in the progressive naturalization of sexual difference that feminist critics have often seen as typifying philosophical, medical, and legal discussions of femininity in Enlightenment France.³ In "Sur les femmes," Diderot identifies women's physical subjugation to putatively natural processes (menstruation, childbirth, aging, even the disease of hysteria) as a defining characteristic of the feminine organism. "C'est par le malaise que nature les a disposées à devenir mères; c'est par une maladie longue et dangereuse qu'elle leur ôte le pouvoir de l'être" ("It is through discomfort that nature makes it possible for women to become mothers; it is by means of a long and dangerous sickness that she takes from them the power to be mothers" [954]). However, Diderot is not just interested, in "Sur les femmes," in stabilizing a rhetoric of feminine inferiority through the establishment of "nature" as a kind of analytical bedrock; he is in addition intensely preoccupied with the problem of women's relationship to processes of social and historical change. His meditation on sexual difference is also a meditation on women's place in and experience of time—what Denise Riley has called the "differing temporal-

ities of ‘women’” (6). This time is characterized first and foremost by its repetitiveness—the cycle of eternal return which becomes, in “Sur les femmes,” the sign of the natural. While men may acquire an abiding civility that legitimately serves to distinguish them from their less sophisticated forebears, women “sont restées de vraies sauvages en dedans” (“have remained real savages within” [958]). In a vexingly paradoxical fashion, women thus bring together the superficial indicators of participation in historical change—the trappings of “civilization”—and the eternal stasis of a time and place outside of (European) history. Woman’s experience is represented as “ce point [qui] s’étend sans mesure” (“this point with infinite extension” [950]): femininity is exemplified by a preoccupation with the ephemeral matter of the here-and-now so focused that it renders women oblivious to the diachronic movement of historical time. Most strikingly, Diderot’s description of the hysterical delirium that threatens at every moment to overwhelm women is rendered less in physiological than in temporal terms. For the woman overcome by her own femininity, “tous les temps lui sont présents” (“all times are present to her” [952]).

Diderot’s desire to identify women with “another time” does not solve the problem posed in his essay by the notion of a feminine temporality which-is-not-one; it merely exacerbates its contradictions. Since, for Diderot, women are so closely connected to nature in the form of the brute matter of their own bodies—bodies which never cease to threaten them with the specter of illness and decay—his attempt to represent the temporality of feminine experience is simultaneously an attempt to represent the temporality of this naturally-occurring matter. However, in order to preserve the stability of sexual difference as a permanently material category, Diderot must effectively negotiate the problem of historical difference introduced—even vis-à-vis the apparent immutability of (sexed) nature—by the passage of time.⁴ In this way, alongside a philosophical exploration of feminine identity in the abstract, Diderot’s essay also raises the historical question of how to understand the identity or sameness of femininity as a *material* category *over time*. If the tyranny of man over woman is “une loi bien connue, générale et constante de la nature” (“a natural law that is well-known,

general, and constant" [955]), for Diderot, it is nonetheless still a law that must be openly recollected and publicly repeated, time and time again, in order to gain its force as social truth. The material fact of femininity is not one that can ever simply be left unsaid.

In what follows, I will first contextualize the Diderotian distinction between a masculinity that generates the motive force for historical development and a femininity serving as the inert "ground" across or upon which historical movement takes place. This distinction, central to Diderot's argument about the proper "time" (and place) to be assigned to femininity, gathers new force as part of an Enlightenment emphasis on the self-conscious individual as a productive force in the social order. (Enlightenment progress, according to this model, operates with the decorous, if essentially invisible, collaboration of women.) I go on to argue that the Enlightenment imbrication of sexual difference in temporal difference is particularly visible in the differentiation between a static sentimentality and a forward-moving libertinage as expressions of, respectively, feminine and masculine modes of temporal experience.⁵ Interestingly, this differentiation is quite neatly expressed in one of Diderot's early works, *Les Bijoux indiscrets*, the novel famously depicted by Michel Foucault in *Histoire de la sexualité* as an allegorization of the nascent modern *scientia sexualis*. In the lesser-known "Sur les femmes," written some twenty-five years later, Diderot's attempts to establish the fact of sexual difference through reference to a narrative of temporal difference have become both more insistent and more analytically precarious. In a discussion of this double movement in Diderot's essay, I return in the second section of the paper to a detailed reading of "Sur les femmes" in order to demonstrate that what seems to be a characteristic dualism informing the division of temporality into masculine and feminine modes is not as stable as it may at first appear. I show that Diderot is in fact haunted, in "Sur les femmes," by the possibility of a *third*, anomalous time—a time of libertine femininity signified by the presence of sexual, desiring women as historical actors. In Diderot's apocalyptic vision of this third temporal framework, woman's pleasure is no longer defined in terms of its consequences upon her

own body, but in terms of its effects on the progress of the social order through time. The public emergence of the libertine woman as a social agent transforms, for Diderot, men's and women's relationships to desire, to the matter of their own bodies, and to history. While normatively virtuous women may only submit to the tyranny of nature (even as men may gain a meaningful independence from this tyranny by thinking critically and acting ethically), libertine women construct the possibility of pleasurable agency from within the social and natural frameworks that insistently plot their subjection. I ultimately suggest that Diderot's anxiety around (and obsession with) the possibility of feminine libertinage necessitates a closer look at the category of the female libertine not just as masculine fantasy, but as a troubling representation of the embeddedness of the sensuous world in historical processes.⁶

1: Enlightened Times: Sexual Difference and the Enlightenment Project

"Sur les femmes" participates in the eighteenth-century fascination with both the (re)definition of sexual difference and the relationship of this difference to emergent discourses on modernity.⁷ During the French Enlightenment, the gradual naturalization of sex includes the naturalization of differing relationships to historical change for men and for women; the process of enlightenment, in other words, is undergone differently according to the sexed status of the individual who is subject to it.⁸ While the eighteenth century arguably made it possible for some women to imagine their history as that of a (universalizable) collectivity—however vitiated by particularisms this category may be—this period also functions as a moment when women seem to lose the ontological basis of a claim to and hold on history as a diachronic movement across times. Women's time, during this period, begins to become rooted in the eternal (and internal) difference of their biology, and increasingly resembles that of natural (rather than social) history.⁹ What thus develops for men, as the Enlightenment progresses, as the possibility of a critical relationship to history—the origin of the "la réactivation permanente d'une attitude" ("the perma-

ment reactivation of an attitude" [571]) that, for Foucault, characterizes an enlightened modernity¹⁰—is for women a return to origins. In a double move, they are inserted into history *as women* only in order to be plucked back out of it again. Even as the medico-scientific and literary communities of the French Enlightenment work to establish the notion of sexual difference as fixed, once and for all, "women" (as sign, not as referent) gradually come to serve as the static point of reference which allows historical progress to be measured. Hence the famous sentence from Book 5 of *Émile*: "Le male n'est mâle qu'en certains instans, la femelle est femelle toute sa vie ou du moins toute sa jeunesse; tout la rappelle sans cesse à son sexe" ("The male is male only at certain moments; the female is female throughout her life or at least throughout her youth; everything incessantly recalls her sex to her" [533]). For Rousseau, being a woman means being persistently identical to the (stable and recognizable) category through which one is defined—a representatively transparent instance of the idea that women perfectly embody, at all times, the broader classification of their *sexe*.

At the same time as the notion of women's difference from men acquires what becomes an enduring obviousness, the spuriously eternal fact of woman's nature emerges as the setting within which the progress of modernity may now take place. Contemporary feminists are not the first to have remarked on the bitter irony of women's exclusion (as subjects) from the progressive development of enlightenment—an exclusion that comes about as a necessary but paradoxical concomitant to the gradual establishment of a potentially universalizable and theoretically neutral public sphere.¹¹ In Germany, Johann Georg Hamann, writing in response to Kant's discussion of "enlightened maturity" in his famous essay "An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?", proclaims, "The self-incurred immaturity is just such a sneer as he makes at the whole fair sex, and which my three daughters will not put up with" (148)—a reply, it might seem, to Kant's assertion that "the far greater part of mankind (including the entire fair sex) regard the step to [enlightened] maturity as not only difficult but very dangerous" (58). For Kant, enlightenment remains the prerogative of the mature few, a cadre in which women can only be included with diffi-

culty. At best, they are asked to submit to a form of tutelage that will gradually instruct them in their interests, which they themselves cannot know with certainty.

The emerging opposition between a femininity in the process of naturalization and a self-conscious masculinity is perhaps most effectively allegorized in the novel, a genre which holds an important position during this period as both the didactic instrument of the interiorization of sex, and a significant site of the (re)construction of women's "nature." In the French context, the rhetorical and social power of the eighteenth-century literary discourse of difference is reaffirmed by contemporary critics who read the sentimental novel as the locus of a specifically feminine (or feminized) ethic, while the libertine novel becomes (sometimes by default) the expression of the uniquely masculine privilege of making pleasurable use of others' bodies in forms both sexual and intellectual. Accordingly, Nancy Miller has claimed that, "Throughout the [eighteenth] century, women writers refuse to locate their subjectivities within the domain of libertine power and knowledge" (7). It is not in the narratives of libertinage, but in the eighteenth-century novel of sensibility that women are said to have been given, as readers, and to have produced, as writers, a history of sorts: the history of their gradual exclusion from visibly historical categories—a progressive affirmation of the inevitable effects of "being a woman." As Miller has put it, "If libertine novels (generally memoirs) are famously involved with sequence, the repetition of stylized events—choose, pursue, seduce, break—that must be enacted in order, novels of sensibility (generally epistolary) dwell on consequence: the emotional, social and physical effects of seduction" (32). Men enact, while women dwell. The history of the *femme sensible* becomes, tragically, a story of predetermined suffering; not only is the naturalization of sexual identity a painful process, but it invests pain itself with a particular meaning for women as the source of a gendered identity.¹² In her work on the development of the sentimental novel in late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century France, Margaret Cohen has described how this process may be rendered literarily: "Rather than suspense, what builds across the sentimental narrative is an increasingly crushing sense

that the conflict between collective welfare and individual freedom is inevitable. Reiteration after reiteration piles up evidence for the conflict's force until the narrative collapses under the weight of a final disaster" (61-2). Cohen goes on to show expertly how sentimental narratives do not conform to a narrative logic driven by the gradual revelation of "unfolding events"; instead, "the sentimental truth . . . emerges from the novel's opening situation" (61).

This construction of "women's time" as a time of return—the constant reiteration of pain as a reminder of what it really means to "be a woman"—stands in opposition to a masculinized temporality that might properly be called the time of enlightened history as well as that of a self-conscious movement into modernity. The latter narrative mode, rather than iterating the inevitable pangs accompanying the enactment of feminine virtue, (re)places the emphasis on the varied pleasures of self-mastery as generating and indeed compelling a form of "progress" through time and space. It is in the context of this difference that Diderot's libertine novel *Les Bijoux indiscrets* has been read by Foucault as emblematic of the modern relationship to the "difficult truth" of sex. Diderot's early work functions, for Foucault, as the paradigmatic example of the mechanism by which the history of modernity becomes simultaneously, and perhaps most fundamentally, a history of (gendered) sexuality. The inauguration of the modern is thus built upon the affirmation of masculine sexual curiosity in the face of women's insistently opaque materiality. Notably, while this affirmation is fraught with uneasiness in "Sur les femmes," *Les Bijoux indiscrets* presents the masculine quest for libertine knowledge as grounded and stabilized by the reassuring presence of feminine sentimentality. In *Les Bijoux indiscrets*, the genie Cucufa provides the jaded sultan Mangogul—supposedly modeled after Louis XV—with a ring that, properly handled, both renders its wearer invisible and causes women's vaginas to begin to talk, thereby giving voice to a series of truths which would normally remain inaccessible (at least to men). As the genie explains, women's "jewels" are "la partie la plus franche qui soit en elles, et la mieux instruite des choses que vous désirez savoir" ("the most sincere organ that they possess, and the

most well-versed in those things that you would like to find out" [40]). As the novel progresses, Mangogul uses his new-found powers to discover more and more unsavory "facts" about women's nature. Appearances notwithstanding, women are revealed to be terminally unfaithful, prone to deception, consummate hypocrites, and sexually voracious.

Even in the sometimes baroquely libertine universe of the *Bijoux*, the crucial distinction between woman of sentiment and man of pleasure plays a fundamental role in organizing the movement of the narrative.¹³ At the same time as *Les Bijoux indiscrets* allows its readers to participate vicariously in Mangogul's gradual enlightenment as to the reality of "what women want," we also witness the effects of the sultan's quest on his beautiful yet principled favorite, Mirzoza.¹⁴ Throughout the novel, Mirzoza plays the sentimentalist to Mangogul's increasingly blasé libertine, as she seeks to defend women's virtue even in the face of mounting evidence that "the sex" is governed primarily by the basest of physical urges. The narrative thus becomes, to a large extent, the account of a confrontation between a quintessentially feminine sensibility (most visible in Mirzoza's seemingly "irrational" belief in the possibility of virtue) and a representatively masculine self-consciousness (shored up by Mangogul's access to the "truth" of women's fundamental nature). While what is being written here is at least in part the history of sex as a privileged site of knowledge, this is a history that seems to configure women most comfortably as the "matter" under investigation—a history in which Mirzoza as a sentimental feminine subject (rather than a sexualized female object) initially plays an ambivalent role. It becomes obvious halfway through the novel, in fact, that the virtuous sentimentality that Mirzoza has come to represent is actually excluded from participation in the dynamic of concealment and revelation by means of which Mangogul arrives at self-recognition through the objectification of other women's *bijoux*. By the end of the work, the reason for this exclusion is itself revealed. The sentimental woman's *bijou* does not speak a forbidden truth: its only "secret" lies in the transparency of its sincere desire. "La femme tendre" ("the tender woman"), as Mirzoza refers to this sentimentalized

female subject, participates in the construction of an enlightened temporality *neither* as object of knowledge *nor* as knowing subject. She is immune to the vicissitudes of history by virtue of her constancy, which she embodies both literally and figuratively.

In a crucial scene toward the middle of the text, Mangogul claims that:

Aussi crois-je que le bijou fait faire à une femme cent choses sans qu'elle s'en aperçoive; et j'ai remarqué dans plus d'une occasion, que telle qui croyait suivre la tête, obéissait à son bijou. Un grand philosophe plaçait l'âme . . . dans la glande pinéale. Si j'en accordais une aux femmes, je sais bien, moi, où je la placerais. (83)

I think that their jewels oblige women to do many things without their knowledge, and I've noticed that on more than one occasion, a woman who thought she was following her head, was really obeying her jewel. A great philosopher placed the soul . . . in the pineal gland. If I were to give one to women, I know very well where I would put it.

The sultan then proceeds to recite to Mirzoza a list of definitions in which women are categorized according to the terms of their relationships with their *bijoux*: the prude pretends not to listen to hers, the voluptuous woman listens to hers too well, and the courtesan is overly indulgent of the demands of hers. When he finishes, the favorite replies, gently, "Je pense . . . que Votre Hautesse a oublié la femme tendre" ("I think . . . that Your Highness has forgotten the tender woman" [84]). The sultan's response to this judiciously proffered remark is to assert that "Si je n'en ai point parlé . . . c'est que je ne sais pas encore bien ce que c'est, et que d'habiles gens prétendent que le mot tendre, pris sans aucun rapport au bijou, est vide de sens" ("If I have not spoken of it . . . it is because I do not yet know what it is, and some clever people believe that the word tender, understood as having no relationship to the jewel, has no meaning" [84]). Mirzoza, in return, attempts to provide the definition that Mangogul is unable to give, but is reduced, after

some stuttering, to claiming, simply, that “La femme tendre est celle . . . qui a aimé sans que son bijou parlât, ou . . . dont le bijou n’a jamais parlé qu’en faveur du seul homme qu’elle aimait” (“The tender woman is she . . . who loves without her jewel having spoken, or . . . she whose jewel has only ever spoken in favor of the one man she loves” [85]). In the last pages of the book, the transparent “secret” of Mirzoza’s *bijou* is revealed when Mangogul finally succeeds in turning the ring on her. The sentimental woman’s “pleasure” is located in her submission to the authority of masculine desire. “Loin de vous, Mangogul,” says Mirzoza’s *bijou*, “qu’allais-je devenir? . . . fidèle jusque dans la nuit du tombeau, je vous aurais cherché; et si l’amour et la constance ont quelque récompense chez les morts, cher prince, je vous aurais trouvé . . . “ (“Far from you, Mangogul, what would I have become? . . . faithful unto the night of the tomb, I would have searched for you; and if love and constancy have some reward in death, dear prince, I would have found you” [234]). The “truth” of “la femme tendre” lies in her static, long-suffering acquiescence to the terms of a narrative in which she is the only thing which does not, and indeed cannot, change.

In *Les Bijoux indiscrets*, it is the constancy of feminine sentimentality that ultimately serves not just to counter but to legitimize the progressive education of the enlightened masculine subject. Certainly, from a post-Enlightenment view, this particular configuration of sexual difference vis-à-vis the processes of historical transformation may appear curiously self-evident. From this perspective, the emphasis of the sentimental narrative—often produced by women—on the “eternal difference” of *la spécificité féminine* (rather than on the liberating universality of shared desire, for instance) might simply reflect the fact that eighteenth-century women experienced the constraints of embodiment—particularly where heterosexual relationships were concerned—in ways that men did not. As Nancy Miller has lucidly argued, because women are necessarily unable to “forget,” conveniently, the physical effects of sex, they tend not to author libertine novels. Men, on the other hand, have a certain “natural” access to sexual pleasure untainted by the fear of undesired and all-too-real material consequences and thus

may acquire, unjustly but inevitably, a privileged hold on the sexual imaginary as a site of transformative possibility. Might this, in fact, be the real truth of the genie's ring?

Yet this distinction, while potentially illuminating, reproduces a troubling gesture by means of which the very difference that the Enlightenment seeks to establish as natural—between men's diachronic historicity, on the one hand, and women's synchronic transfixion, on the other—is revealed as its explanatory principle. It is important to recall that the "nature" of this difference is never stabilized once and for all, for it depends on the persistent effacement of other temporal possibilities—narratives in which accounts of women's libertine pleasure (or, indeed, men's sentimentalized suffering) might at the very least suggest significant variations on the themes of feminine constancy and masculine *Bildung*.¹⁵ Not unlike the relationship between real women and the "natural" categories, traits, or qualities that are thought to constitute their identity as such, the connection between a fixed feminine identity and a "natural" feminine temporality of the body is not permanently established, but must be remade, over and over again, in a process that never goes without saying, even as it acquires a certain force of habit. It is precisely this fact that gives such classifications both their authority—the production and reproduction of femininity, for instance, is a ceaseless and consuming task—and their potential uncertainty—each act of iteration brings with it the possibility of difference *in the very moment of repetition*.¹⁶ The "naturalness" and inevitability of this repetition are both confirmed and belied by the need for its reiteration, as Diderot anxiously discovers in "Sur les femmes." Diderot's essay, while it seeks to affirm the stability of sexual difference through repeated reference to the static core of sentimentalized feminine experience, ends by portraying sexual difference as under a specific (historical) threat *despite* the necessarily universal applicability of this difference to all historical schemata. The figure of the female libertine, herself the particular product of a movement towards modernity, radically calls into question the material reality of Diderot's division of experience into two times. It is in the very repetition of this division that the terms of its undoing may be revealed.

2: Libertine Times: Matter into History in “Sur les femmes”

“Sur les femmes” orients the reader with an evocation of the familiar tropes of feminine sensibility—a sensibility that is made to display itself at the insistence of the author, who claims to be driven by his own sexual need. Diderot chastises the unhappy Thomas for having treated with dry objectivity a subject—women—that seems to demand an outpouring of emotion, a sentimentalized account of a sentimental being. “J’aurais écrit avec moins d’impartialité et de sagesse, mais je me serais occupé avec plus d’intérêt et de chaleur du seul être de la nature qui nous rende sentiment pour sentiment et qui soit heureux du bonheur qu’il nous fait” (“I would have written with less impartiality and wisdom, but I would have studied with more interest and warmth the only being in nature who responds to our sentiments with her own and who is made happy by the happiness which she gives us” [949]). Not only does Diderot’s chiding of Thomas effectively feminize him, it does so by figuratively subjugating the abbé to the overwhelming force of Diderot’s libertine desire.¹⁷ As the first sentence of the essay indicates, Diderot loves (dry) Thomas, but he loves (sentimental) women even more. Although Thomas’s treatise “ne fût d’aucun sexe” (“had no sex” [949]), Diderot’s brief response to the *Essai* is so emphatically phallic that it threatens to unman even his fellow author. Diderot’s overflowing desire remains, nonetheless, in the service of knowledge, while feminine “sentiment” is most notable for the way in which it obscures or counteracts the effects of reason. As Diderot remarks early on, the libertine ability to seek out and experience orgasm, far from being linked to the pleasurable dissolution of the self, is in fact the sign of an enlightened masculinity literally in possession of its faculties (both rational and sensual). Diderot writes:

Cette sensation que je regarderais volontiers comme une épilepsie passagère est rare pour elles, et ne manque jamais d’arriver quand nous l’appelons. Le souverain bonheur les fuit entre les bras de l’homme qu’elles adorent; nous le trouvons à côté d’une femme com-

plaisante qui nous déplaît. Moins maîtresses de leurs sens que nous, la récompense en est moins prompte et moins sûre pour elles . . . (950)

That sensation that I would willingly see as a form of passing epilepsy is rare for them, and never fails to come when we call. Sovereign happiness eludes them in the arms of the man whom they adore; we come upon it with an obliging woman who does not attract us. Less in command of their senses than we, the reward that they receive from them is less prompt and less certain . . .

Diderot's presentation of an exquisitely sensitive yet sexually impaired femininity is temporally inflected from the outset. For men, "Les distractions d'une vie occupée et contentieuse rompent nos passions. La femme couve les siennes; c'est un point fixe sur lequel son oisiveté ou la frivolité de ses fonctions tient son regard sans cesse attaché" ("The distractions of a busy and contentious life break up the force of our passions. Woman incubates hers; they are a fixed point towards which her idleness or the frivolity of her functions constantly directs her gaze" [950]). In this passage, the fixity of women's time is juxtaposed with the flux of men's. The various and sundry directions in which men tend to be carried, their many trajectories as public creatures, stand in stark contrast to the solitary obsessions of women's existence. Women's time, fundamentally, does not evolve, it *is*. This invariability may express itself either in the random yet intense focus of the hysteric,¹⁸ or, more paradoxically but also more typically, in the chaotic jumble of "ordinary" woman's experience. "Elles sont rarement systématiques," writes Diderot at the end of the essay, "toujours à la dictée du moment" ("They are rarely systematic, always governed by the moment" [961]). Such consistent fickleness produces the same kind of synchronic, ahistorical experience of time as the hysteric's more unitary preoccupations. As Diderot affirms:

La femme porte au-dedans d'elle-même un organe susceptible de spasmes terribles, disposant d'elle et suscitant dans son imagination des fantômes de toute espèce. C'est dans le délire hystérique qu'elle revient sur le

passé, qu'elle s'élançe dans l'avenir, que tous les temps lui sont présents. C'est de l'organe propre à son sexe que partent toutes ses idées extraordinaires. (952)

Woman carries within her an organ prone to terrible spasms, governing her and producing in her imagination specters of all kinds. It is in hysterical delirium that she travels back to the past and throws herself into the future, that all times are present to her. It is from the organ characteristic of her sex that all of these extraordinary ideas develop.

Whether frivolous or obsessed, women naturally have in common a kind of absolute inability to participate appropriately in history; they remain rooted, for the moment, in the present. Even the virtuous woman exists steadfastly outside of time while all around her moves ineluctably forward; her context is out of context, unaffected by the progression of history. Her merit lies in her natural resistance to a progressive temporality (as opposed to the hysteric's wild negation of it). As Diderot makes clear in a passage on feminine virtue which figures as part of a brief history of the evolution of relationships between the sexes:

Les hommes, que des relations plus étendues éloignent souvent de leur atelier ou de leurs foyers, se trouvent dans la nécessité d'associer à leurs talents la vigilance des femmes. Comme l'habitude de la galanterie, du luxe, de la dissipation, ne les a pas encore dégoûtées des occupations obscures ou sérieuses, elles se livrent sans réserve et avec succès à des fonctions dont elles se trouvent honorées. La retraite qu'exige ce genre de vie, leur rend chère et familière la pratique de toutes les vertus domestiques.

(957)

Men, who are taken away from their ateliers and their homes by a more extended network of relationships, find themselves obliged to associate their talents with the vigilance of women. Since the habits of gallantry, luxury, and dissipation have not yet caused them to tire of

obscure and serious occupations, [women] devote themselves with reserve and success to the functions that they are honored to have. The retreat that this way of life demands makes the practice of domestic virtues familiar and dear to them.

The ideal woman, here, is not only fixed in place but fixed in time, as well. That which is “familiar” becomes that which is “dear”; the static vigilance of women complements the desires, needs, and “talents” of men.

The implied comparison, in “*Sur les femmes*,” between men’s active transformation of the world and women’s passive submission to its constraints at first seems to confirm the “enlightened” schematization of sexual difference as producing and produced by the division of human experience into two temporalities, differently gendered. Yet what is most interesting about this essay is not that it is primarily concerned, like *Les Bijoux indiscrets*, with the way in which the juxtaposition of a latent, masculinized historicity and an explicit, feminized atemporality becomes the mechanism that undergirds the very idea of the Enlightenment project per se. Diderot is most vexed, in his final version of the essay, by what might be understood as a “third time”: a perverse and libertine time of decadence, cultural corruption, and the triumph of women over the “proper” distinction between the socializing powers of the male *Bildung* and the restorative ones of the female “retreat.” This debauched “third time”—the quintessential time of an Ancien Régime that must be foreclosed in order to make way for the new one—is the bizarre result of women’s untoward movement into historical contexts. It is the consequence of a concerted attempt by women to act directly upon history—to refuse their assimilation into an ahistorical “matter” and thereby to deprive an enlightened modernity of its condition of possibility. First and foremost, this third, libertine temporality is fundamentally unnatural. In a passage he contributed to the *Histoire des deux Indes* (and which does not appear in “*Sur les femmes*”) Diderot describes concisely the nature of this time:

Leurs liaisons s’étendent. La vie retirée ne leur convient plus. Il leur faut un rôle plus éclatant. Jetées sur le

théâtre du monde, elles deviennent l'âme de tous les plaisirs, et le mobile des affaires les plus importantes. Le bonheur souverain est de leur plaire, et la grande ambition d'en obtenir quelques préférences. (Qtd. in editor's note to "Sur les femmes" [957])

[Women's] liaisons extend themselves. The quiet life no longer agrees with them. They need a more dramatic role. Thrown onto the stage of the world, they become the soul of all pleasures, and the motive of the most important affairs. The most exalted happiness is to please them, and the greatest ambition to obtain their preference.

While "Sur les femmes" insists most urgently on women's heightened sensibility as the mechanism of their exclusion from the causal narratives of history, the specter of this "third," unnatural, and corrupt(ing) time in fact never ceases to haunt the essay, which consistently displays an uneasiness in the face of women's involvement in processes of socio-historical transformation. Such an involvement only seems to be at odds with the ways in which women are always at the mercy of their own (hysterical) bodies, since it ultimately becomes clear that the libertine can affect the movement of history in disturbing and nefarious ways through the subtle and often invisible manipulation of her "natural" embodiment in matter.¹⁹

The disjointed quality of "Sur les femmes" soon reveals itself as linked to the difficulty of adequately reading difference in what should be its most self-evident manifestations, since women who resist being governed by the putatively universal code of feminine suffering are unreadable according to the terms of this very code. As a result, Diderot's essay moves erratically from lament—women are to be pitied for their weaknesses—to panegyric—women are to be celebrated for their virtues—to imprecation—men beware!²⁰ Since men, Diderot explains, are naturally granted a relatively direct control over their own bodies that is rarely found in women, feminine experience is more likely to be characterized by various forms of physical suffering. "J'ai vu une femme honnête frissonner d'horreur à l'approche de son époux," writes Diderot ("I've seen an honest woman shiver

with horror at the approach of her spouse" [950]). Yet, despite women's lack of mastery over even their persons, their apparent weakness may serve to conceal an aptitude for power that is all the more alarming to that extent that its origins remain fundamentally enigmatic. From pathetic victims of their own bodies, women suddenly become

Impénétrables dans la dissimulation, cruelles dans la vengeance, constantes dans leurs projets, sans scrupule . . . , armées d'une haine profonde et secrète contre le despotisme de l'homme, il semble qu'il y ait entre elles un complot tacite de domination, une sorte de ligue telle que celle qui subsiste entre les prêtres de toutes les nations; elles en connaissent les articles sans se les être communiqués. Naturellement curieuses, elles veulent savoir, soit pour user, soit pour abuser de tout; dans les temps de révolution, la curiosité les prostitue aux chefs de parti.

(950)

Impenetrable in their dissimulation, cruel in their vengeance, constant in their projects, without any scruples . . . , armed with a profound and secret hatred for the despotism of man, it seems that there exists among them a tacit conspiracy, a sort of league similar to that which unites priests of all nations; they know the articles of faith of this creed without having communicated them to one another. Naturally curious, they want to know everything, either to use, or to abuse this knowledge; in the time of revolution, curiosity makes them prostitute themselves to the leaders of political parties.

This time of revolution is that, implicitly, of the libertine—of Madame de Merteuil in *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, for instance, and her similar insistence on the principles of concealment and the cultivation of *curiosité*.²¹ However, this revolutionary moment is not simply brought about as the result of women's expropriation of the male privilege of pleasure. The "time of revolution" produces, in Diderot's account, a complete reversal of the mechanism by means of which the masculine narrative of *Bildung* is first set in motion. For men, self-knowledge leads to self-mastery; embodied matter is

transformed through the process of reflection. Although women also “want to know,” according to Diderot, their curiosity results, not in the transcendence of what was previously assumed to be a uniquely feminine burden—namely, women’s weak and unresponsive bodies—but in the most perfect expression of what might be called a feminine libertine materialism—the embrace of embodied matter itself as the ironic principle of transformation. Women are dangerous, affirms Diderot, because of their ability to manage the realm of the material (and even to counterfeit modes of material embodiment) by surrendering themselves utterly to their own imbrication in matter: “Elles simuleront l’ivresse de la passion si elles ont un grand intérêt à vous tromper” (“They will simulate the drunkenness of passion if they have a good reason to deceive you” [951]), More disturbingly, “elles l’éprouveront sans s’oublier. Le moment où elles seront toutes à leur projet sera quelquefois celui même de leur abandon” (“they will experience [this drunkenness] without forgetting themselves. The moment when they are at their most scheming may also be that of their greatest abandon” [951]).

As the essay continues, the distinction between the virtuous (albeit often unhappy) woman and her libertine counterpart is further refined, at the same time as more emphasis is given to the crucial problem of women’s place in time. Diderot returns again and again to the fact of women’s physical suffering as evidence of the ways in which most women are effectively tyrannized by the corporeal matter of which they are themselves made up. Women’s time is naturally, if lamentably, that of the body; she is the limited subject of temporal transformation insofar as she is infinitely subjected to the changes that her physical attributes undergo as she ages. The young girl, at the moment of puberty, acquires, according to Diderot, the character traits that will define her for the rest of her life; this critical juncture is also a time of *malaise*, bringing with it a sadness and an anxiety that are never overcome, since they are effectively reproduced every month as a function of the menstrual cycle. Once married, Diderot’s “typical” woman must suffer through the pangs of pregnancy. Not only does she risk her life in order to give birth, but in doing so she endangers both her health and her beauty. Her reproductive organs them-

selves are always subject to a set of painful and incurable diseases, regardless of her ability to have children. As time passes and the woman ages, the *malaise* of her reproductive years transforms itself into the “maladie longue et dangereuse” (“a long and dangerous malady” [954]) that eventually renders her incapable of giving birth. Any moments of joy are short-lived as her charms wane and she faces the ever-likelier prospect of sexual abandonment. Her spouse neglects her once her beauty no longer serves to draw him to her, her adult children have no need for her, and in a larger social sense she can have no “useful” function.

In a gesture that is meant to be one of sympathy, Diderot laments this dismal state of subjection even as he naturalizes it and locates its origins in the relative physical feebleness of women, on the one hand, and the visible “cruelty” of nature, which has rendered them victims of their own ability to reproduce, on the other. Women’s subordination to men, Diderot claims, is invariable and inevitable. Even though women in civilized societies may fare slightly better than women “au fond des forêts” (“in the depths of forests” [954]), all women have in common the experience of suffering at the hands of men as the necessary result of a physiological makeup that seems to take pain as its organizing principle. Women do benefit to a certain extent from the development of enlightened civilizations, but the terms of their subordination are still decided in advance. In the most perfect state of social equilibrium—the one in which both men and women derive the most mutual benefits from each other’s company—men consolidate their grasp on history while women regulate a semi-private sphere in which the near, the dear, and the familiar stand as the counterparts to men’s successful conquest of the distant, the complex, and the strange. Having painted this harmonious picture, however, Diderot once again returns to that possibility that seemed to be effectively excluded by virtue of his insistence on the inability of women in general to redefine or even mitigate the state of dependence in which they must always find themselves. He conjures, in contrast to this “natural” time of women’s subjection, the vision of another temporality—the debauched fall from grace of the libertine—as a persistent threat to the stabili-

ty of the union of the two sexes across their separate and decidedly unequal states. In Diderot's words:

Oui, les liaisons de la galanterie consomment la dépravation des mœurs et la caractérisent plus fortement que la prostitution publique. La religion est perdue, lorsque le prêtre mène une vie scandaleuse; pareillement la vertu n'a plus d'asile, lorsque le sanctuaire du mariage est profané. La pudeur est sous la sauvegarde du sexe timide. Qui est-ce qui rougira, où la femme ne rougit plus? . . . O temps heureux et grossiers de nos pères, où il n'y avait que des femmes honnêtes ou malhonnêtes; où toutes celles qui n'étaient pas honnêtes étaient malhonnêtes, et où le vice constant ne s'excusait pas par sa durée! (960)

Yes, gallant liaisons complete the corruption of morals and are more characteristic of this corruption than is public prostitution. Religion is lost, when the priest leads a scandalous life; likewise, virtue can find no asylum, when the sanctuary of marriage is profaned. Modesty is preserved by the timid sex. Who will blush, when women no longer do? . . . O happy and simple times of our fathers, when women were either honest or depraved; when all those who were not honest were depraved, and when unremitting vice did not find excuses for itself in its duration!

This libertine time represents a moment of upheaval during which women somehow overthrow the tyranny of embodiment as the principle of their suffering and emerge perversely triumphant. Feminine libertinage enacts the subjugation of masculine historicity by contagious, unnatural, passionate yet coldly calculating "thinking matter." This possibility is both unthinkable, since woman is understood to be everywhere "soumise à l'homme" ("subject to man" [955]), and already present, since the results of women's corruption are all too visible in eighteenth-century French society, where "La femme corrompue propage la corruption" ("The corrupt woman propagates corruption" [959]).²² The universality and naturalness of women's subjugation is shown to be threatened, in the very moment of its most persistent reiteration, by the specter of women's desire. As part of an effort to ward off

the transformation of women's "natural" weakness into this form of feminine revenge, urgings to mothers to safeguard their daughters from the danger of perceiving *their own pleasure* as a form of recompense for the inevitability of feminine suffering accompany Diderot's anxious depictions of female libertinage run amuck. If the daughters fail to heed these warnings, they run the risk of "la dépravation des mœurs" ("moral depravity" [960]), with the result that "Celle qui ne se respecte plus cesse bientôt d'être sensible au blâme et à la louange . . . Il n'y a plus que la fureur du plaisir qui puisse la dédommager du sacrifice qu'elle a fait. Elle le sent; elle se le dit; et affranchie de la contrainte de la considération publique, elle s'y livre sans réserve" ("She who no longer respects herself soon ceases to be sensitive to censure or to praise . . . Only the furor of pleasure can compensate for the sacrifice she has made. She feels this; she admits it to herself; and, freed from the constraints of public consideration, she gives herself up to it without reservations" [959]). It is the "furor of pleasure" that constitutes women's entry into history, where, not unlike the "fausse dévote" ("falsely devout woman" [958]) the "mauvais prêtre" ("evil priest" [958]) and the "homme [qui] ose par la force" ("man daring to act with violence" [959]) she succeeds in contaminating the social order. This potential disruption marks the difference, in a sense, between "les femmes sauvages" ("savage women") and "les femmes civilisées" ("civilized women") who, despite appearances, have remained "de vraies sauvages en dedans" ("real savages within" [958]). The former are subject to the brutality of man, while the latter threaten to transform this brutality into widespread cultural decadence. Because the "civilized" nation is also a nation with a history—as Diderot outlines in his discussion of the movement from barbarism, to pastoralism, to "la création des arts et du commerce" ("the creation of the arts and of commerce" [957])—it is civilization that is most at risk in the face of women's insistent materiality, a materiality rendered visible in the propagation of their contagious pleasures. Most disturbingly, the debauched libertine is also somehow a thinking subject. If all women are "machiavélistes du plus au moins" ("more or less machiavellian" [958]), she may represent the most "machiavéliste" of all. Yet her machiavellianism consists, not in the sophisticat-

ed use of reason, but in the manipulation of seemingly immutable matter to transform the very physical circumstances that otherwise constrain her: “Où il y a un mur d’airain pour nous, il n’y a souvent qu’une toile d’araignée pour elles” (“Where there is a wall of bronze for us, there is often only a spider-web for them” [958]).

The only weapon against the dreadful future (already in part a present) envisioned by Diderot is a complete societal devotion to guaranteeing the stability of a distinction that originally seemed a natural one. Diderot writes:

Fixez avec le plus de justesse et d’impartialité que vous pourrez les prérogatives de l’homme et de la femme, mais n’oubliez pas que faute de réflexion et de principes rien ne pénètre jusqu’à une certaine profondeur de conviction dans l’entendement des femmes; que les idées de justice, de vertu, de vice, de bonté, de méchanceté nagent à la superficie de leur âme; qu’elles ont conservé l’amour-propre et l’intérêt personnel avec toute l’énergie de nature, et que plus civilisées que nous en dehors, elles sont restées de vraies sauvages en dedans . . . (958)

Establish with the most justice and impartiality possible the prerogatives of man and woman, but don’t forget that, in the absence of reflection and of principles, nothing penetrates very far into the understanding of women; that ideas of justice, of virtue, of vice, and gratitude, of wickedness swim on the surface of their soul; that they preserve their amour propre and personal interest with all the energy of nature, and that, more civilized than you in appearance, they have remained true savages on the inside . . .

In order for the “savages” not to overwhelm that which is “civilized,” women’s roles must be “fixed” in place (and women themselves, in an even more visceral image, “suspended”). It is here, in fact, that Diderot again charges Thomas with having gone wrong, for the latter has failed to bind women to their own image in an appropriate fashion; he has done no more than to speak *of* them. This is not enough, for Diderot exhorts his fellow author: “suspendez-les sous mes yeux comme autant de thermomètres des moindres

vicissitudes des mœurs et des usages” (“Suspend them before my eyes like so many thermometers measuring the slightest changes in mores and in customs” [958]).²³ Women, as the sign of the insistent materiality of the real, must be subjected to the gaze of the scientist, the naturalist, and the historian; through this subjection, they become fantastical subjects, and transcend the circumstances of their embodiment in an unthreateningly ethereal fashion. At the hands of the talented author, they are transmogrified and reshaped as an ephemeral substance—a dematerialized matter resembling “l’arc-en-ciel” (“the rainbow” [957]) and “la poussière des ailes du papillon” (“the dust from butterfly wings” [957]).

Unfortunately, from Diderot’s perspective, the gentle subjugation of women by those who would pay them appropriate homage is hardly guaranteed. The figure of the libertine destabilizes the process by which women’s “matter” is incorporated into (or left out of) history. The “vice gratuit” (“gratuitous vice” [960]) of the current age makes Diderot long for the “temps heureux et grossiers de nos pères, où il n’y avait que des femmes honnêtes ou malhonnêtes” (“happy and simple times of our fathers, when women were either honest or depraved” [960]). In the present time, this strict division finds itself under attack, and both masculinity and femininity take on a certain dangerous fluidity. This present—at once modern and decadent—is not the time of momentary pleasure in which the cultivation of sensual delight provides a means of self-mastery, as it does for a whole series of male libertines. Women, here, do not simply trade places with men, claiming the “right” to pleasure as a mode of personal property. This is a time that bears witness to the complete reorganization of the relationship between women and the “fact” of their corporeality—a temporal impetus that does not resolve itself in the private cultivation of the autonomous feminine self but instead produces the specter of matter (nature) playing fast and loose with history.²⁴ “Les devoirs les plus sacrés et les plus doux deviennent importuns . . . Les noeuds du sang se relâchent. Les naissances sont incertaines, et le fils ne reconnaît plus son père, ni le père son fils” (“The most sacred and sweetest duties become onerous . . . The bonds of blood loosen. Heritage is uncertain, and the son no longer recognizes his father, nor

the father his son" [960]). Women, who are responsible for this series of catastrophes, manage both to embody an extraordinary passion (for vice) and an illegible frigidity (made manifest as a cold disregard for virtue). It is the specter of this contradiction that shakes the foundations of the "easy" division of time into two. Feminine pleasure has rendered illegitimate the distinction between that which is mutable (enlightened history) and that which serves to make mutability readable in the first place (subjugated matter).

The existence of this third, libertine temporality demonstrates how the double time of sentimentality, on the one hand, and that of enlightened reason, on the other, are dependent on a foreclosure of sorts; Diderot's perverse, libertine time, in which matter is suddenly historicized (or rather, suddenly seizes control of the terms of its own historicity), is the object of a prohibition. This "other" temporality might be said to reveal a critical mode—a materialist reconfiguration of the real that is something other than the "permanent reactivation of an attitude" of Foucault's (and Kant's) enlightened modernity. In Diderot's essay, the restoration of the national order and social tranquillity that is threatened by the public display of feminine pleasure is made possible through the continual *reaffirmation* of a principle of difference that is rooted in women's proximity to an immutable and atemporal matter. This proximity guarantees their subjugation, but the latter must paradoxically be subjected to constant repetition in order to safeguard its own inevitability. When gendered matter is instead imagined as fundamentally mutable—and in constant relationship to the movement of human history across times—then the stability of difference becomes difficult to maintain. This mutability is most visible in the expression of feminine pleasure—a pleasure with public consequences given that the continuity of marriage, the family, and inheritance are all predicated on its absence from the public sphere. Libertine women dangerously insist on giving their desires public expression and thus resist the excision of feminine desire from social history. If women's "natural" victimization guarantees the continuity and legibility of progressive change by virtue of the material difference between feminine suffering in embodiment and masculine transcendence (through enjoyment) of

embodiment, the very existence of feminine pleasure relativizes the need for submission to enlightened orders. (As Diderot writes, the more *voluntary* feminine desire is, the more *illicit* it must be considered). “Enlightened times” are thus the product of resistance to other temporal (and material) possibilities. In “Sur les femmes,” Diderot pathologizes not only hysterical mystics (the very manifestation of *ancien régime* superstition), but the more “modern” figure of the sexy libertine whose experience is marked, not by the reiteration of her subjection, but by the (re)affirmation of her pleasures. Furthermore, Diderot shows, in “Sur les femmes,” that the putative authenticity of a discourse of sentimentalized femininity is predicated upon this very pathologization. Libertine (or incurably hysterical) femininity must be rendered fully perverse in order to understand sexual difference as naturally produced. In the uneasy balance that it strikes, Diderot’s essay reminds us, not only that matter—like femininity—has a history, but that the specter of the libertine woman—as frivolous as she may seem—haunts eighteenth-century attempts to configure women’s bodies as specifically constrained within the vicissitudes of material experience.

Notes

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¹I will return to the larger implications of Diderot’s choice to begin an essay “on women” with a proclamation of love for a man. The opening sentence seems particularly suggestive given that Diderot goes on to question the virility of both Thomas and his work. Diderot writes, “Il a voulu que son livre ne fût d’aucun sexe, et il n’y a malheureusement que trop bien réussi; c’est un hermaphrodite” (“He wanted his book to have no sex, and sadly he has succeeded only too well in this; it is a hermaphrodite”; [949]). Thomas’s treatise appeared in January, 1772; the first version of “Sur les femmes” was printed in the April 1 *Correspondance littéraire* of the same year. Diderot’s essay appeared twice more in the *Correspondance littéraire* (of July 1, 1772 and of April 1, 1777); these later versions contain substantial additions borrowed from

Diderot's contributions to the abbé Raynal's *Histoire des deux Indes*. Citations in this paper are taken from a ca. 1780 copy of "Sur les femmes" reprinted in Laurent Versini's edition of Diderot's *Oeuvres*. This version is the most complete of the surviving copies and, according to Versini, was the last to be reviewed by Diderot. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations of "Sur les femmes" and other texts are my own.

²Badinter has written that Diderot describes women, in this essay, as being "hors de l'humanité" ("outside of humanity"; [40])—the product of nature, rather than culture.

³See Rendall; Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere*; Schiebinger, *The Mind Has No Sex?* and *Nature's Body*; Laqueur; Steinbrügge; Godineau; Mainil; McMillan and Vila. See also Scott's discussion of French feminists' attempts to negotiate problems of sexual difference, equality, and individual identity in *Only Paradoxes to Offer*. In a detailed reading of "Sur les femmes," Trouille describes Diderot's rhetoric in this essay as "naturalist."

⁴Diderot is of course well-known for his assertion of the fundamental heterogeneity of matter. In *Le rêve de d'Alembert*, man is described as "une infinité d'animalcules dont il est impossible de prévoir les métamorphoses et l'organisation future et dernière" ("an infinite number of animalcules of which it is impossible to predict the metamorphoses as well as the future and final structure"; [630]). Likewise, in "Sur les femmes," woman's nature is portrayed as consisting of contradictory and diffuse qualities: femininity is marked as the reconciliation of irreconcilable extremes. Even in the natural state of permanent flux described by Diderot in *Le rêve*, however, the dividing line—or "cut"—represented by sexual difference retains its legibility. In *Le rêve*, femininity is described as an "error"; the potential reversibility of man into woman is a sign of monstrosity. For a reading of this manipulation of the discourse of the monstrous in Diderot, see Huet.

⁵This gendered split between sentimentality and libertinage not only informs Diderot's discussion of women in both "Sur les femmes" and *Les Bijoux indiscrets* (first published in 1748), it remains in place in much contemporary literary criticism of the Enlightenment period.

⁶Diderot's anxiety was widely shared, particularly by critics of the novel as a form prone to encourage feminine misbehavior or "corruption." For a useful discussion, in the French context, of the threat thought to be posed by novel-reading, see Coulet (175-190).

⁷This essay works with the assumption that eighteenth-century men and women do not stand in the same relationship to a generalized rhetoric of enlightenment insofar as they are defined and classed by their gender. Not only Diderot but Rousseau and Kant (to take two famous examples) seem definite on this point. In this respect I do not share the perspective, eloquently articulated by Hesse in *The Other Enlightenment*, that women may function as

fundamentally equal participants in modernity to the extent that this modernity is constituted as a product of the Enlightenment. This does not mean that the eighteenth century did not present new opportunities and possibilities for women. It does mean, however, that a crucial Enlightenment understanding of the relationship between gender, matter, and history—in which women are identified with the materiality of their own bodies just as “brute” or immutable matter becomes that which foregrounds the temporal progress of historical processes rather than that which participates in the shaping of these processes—makes it impossible for women to participate in enlightenment on strictly equal terms insofar as they are gendered as women. When Marx writes that, in the eighteenth century, “in this society of free competition the individual appears free from the bonds of nature, etc., which in former epochs of history made him a part of a definite limited human conglomeration,” this apparently “free” individual cannot be a feminine individual given that femininity is understood in the context of its prior embeddedness in “natural” processes (1).

⁸This is true for the problem of difference as a whole, however this difference is negotiated. For instance, Aravamudan makes brilliantly clear in *Tropicopolitans* how the fissure opened in an Enlightenment discourse of universalism and liberation by a racialized discourse of difference enables a rewriting of that discourse in other, tropicopolitan terms.

⁹Kristeva makes a related point in her essay “Le temps des femmes,” where she describes the notion of “generative space” as archetypally feminine. “C’est en effet à l’*espace générateur* de notre espèce humaine que l’on pense en évoquant le nom et le destin des femmes, davantage qu’au *temps*, au devenir ou à l’histoire. Les sciences modernes de la subjectivité, de sa généalogie ou de ses accidents, confirment cette division qui peut être le résultat d’une conjoncture socio-historique” (“In evoking the name and the destiny of women, we in fact think of the *generative space* of our human species, rather than of *time*, of becoming, or of history. The modern sciences of subjectivity, of its genealogy or of its contingencies, confirm this division that may be the result of a sociohistorical conjuncture”; [301]). While Kristeva traces this distinction back to Plato, I would read the Enlightenment as working to produce (and obsessively narrating) a particular reconfiguration in the relationship between women and the process of critique (as a form of active participation in historical transformation). For a commentary on Kristeva’s article, alongside an analysis of the relationship between the historical time of consciousness and the “timelessness” of the unconscious, see Ferrell.

¹⁰Foucault writes, “je voulais souligner, d’autre part, que le fil qui peut nous rattacher de cette manière à l’*Aufklärung* n’est pas la fidélité à des éléments de doctrine, mais plutôt la réactivation permanente d’une attitude; c’est-à-dire d’un *ethos* philosophique qu’on pourrait caractériser comme critique permanente de notre

être historique" ("I have wanted to emphasize, on the one hand, that the thread that may connect us in this sense to *Aufklärung* is not fidelity to doctrinal elements, but rather the permanent reactivation of an attitude—that is to say, of a philosophical *ethos* that could be characterized as a permanent critique of our historical being"; [571]).

¹¹For an account of this double movement, see Landes, *Visualizing the Nation and Women and the Public Sphere*. See, too, Fraisse's chapter on "La rupture révolutionnaire" in *Les femmes et leur histoire*. For a helpful discussion of women's participation in and exclusion from public politics during the French Revolution, see the section entitled "La rupture politique et le nouvel ordre du discours" in Fraisse and Perrot.

¹²In other words, this pain is not only the pain inherent in the experience of the female body as a body wracked by the trauma of reproduction (in Diderot's and Nancy Miller's terms). The pain that women experience is a direct result of the paradox produced by the construction of feminine identity as fundamentally embodied: women's persistent physicality places them in necessary conflict with the constraints of an abstracted social order. The depiction of feminine sentimental virtue thus involves a demonstration of the "naturalness" (not the artificiality or constructedness) of ethical feeling in women, in contrast to a social order which does not always (or consistently) honor the primacy of this nature. Margaret Cohen, in *The Sentimental Education of the Novel*, strikingly describes this struggle as devolving into one between negative and positive notions of rights.

¹³In other words, the libertine plot seems as dependent on the existence of virtuous sensibility as the sentimental plot is on the existence of the potential threat of non-normative desire. This generic interdependence suggests that neither mode should be read as the "authentic" expression of a particular gendered subjectivity.

¹⁴*Les Bijoux indiscrets* is generally understood to be, among other things, a roman à clef, with Mangogul playing the part of Louis XV and Mirzoza standing in for Madame de Pompadour.

¹⁵Both sentimental and libertine narratives give voice to the threat posed by these variations. The libertine preoccupation with masculine impotence (in Crébillon fils's *Tanzai et Néadarné, une histoire japonaise*, for instance) and the sentimental critique of feminine libertinage (in Françoise de Graffigny's *Lettres d'une péruvienne*, for example) might be read as attempts to contain the possibility of failure in the "proper" production of gender.

¹⁶See on this process Butler, *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies That Matter*.

¹⁷Diderot's description of Thomas as someone who "a beaucoup pensé, mais . . . pas assez senti" ("had thought much, but . . . not felt enough"; [949]) is a lightly veiled reference to the fact that Thomas was generally thought to be a virgin.

¹⁸In “Diderot et l’autre féminin,” Brewer suggests that the hysteria Diderot attributes to women is in fact also visible in Diderot’s own unsuccessful attempts to define “woman” herself. “S’il y a ici hystérie,” he writes, “c’est peut-être celle de Diderot, qui s’exprime dans ses tentatives sans cesse renouvelées de définir la femme” (“If there is hysteria here, it is perhaps Diderot’s own, which expresses itself in his endlessly renewed attempts to define woman”; [89]).

¹⁹This “unnatural” force is associated with the hysterical woman mystic as well—of whom Diderot writes, “on l’écoute, elle est convaincue, elle persuade” (“she is listened to, she is convinced, she persuades”; [952])—with the fundamental difference that the hysteric can *be cured* by the intervention of the enlightened doctor or magistrate. Diderot explains, “Mais cette imagination fougueuse, cet esprit qu’on croirait incoercible, un mot suffit pour l’abattre” (“But one word is enough to destroy this fiery imagination, this mind that seems impossible to coerce”; [953]). The libertine, on the other hand, is “thinking matter” personified; she is self-conscious, and is thus not immediately vulnerable to the enlightened cure. Once Diderot disposes of the problem of the hysteric in the first pages of the essay, she does not return; the second half of the text has forgotten her.

²⁰Fontenay claims that Diderot produces this essay “en amant” (“as a lover”; [103]), as a writer who recognizes the place of his own desire in his text. If this is true, whatever self-consciousness may result from such a position does not prevent him from adopting a preachy tone when questions of women’s virtue are under consideration.

²¹In her words, “Cette utile curiosité, en servant à m’instruire, m’apprit encore à dissimuler: forcée de cacher les objets de mon attention aux yeux de ceux qui m’entouraient, j’essayai de guider les miens à mon gré; j’obtins dès lors de prendre à volonté ce regard distrait que vous avez loué si souvent” (“That useful curiosity, which served to instruct me, also taught me to dissimulate: forced to conceal the objects of my attention from the eyes of those who surrounded me, I attempted to direct my own [eyes] as I pleased; I ultimately became able to assume at will that distracted gaze that you have so often praised”; [171]).

²²This image prefigures the practices of Sadean libertine heroines, who tend not to reproduce, or, if they do, do so only in order to be able to indulge in acts of infanticide.

²³For a discussion of the broader resonance of the image of the “femme-thermomètre,” see Castle.

²⁴In this sense the most dangerous of libertines remains she who can successfully counterfeit the suffering of the sentimental woman, for this form of masking represents perhaps the most perfect conjugation of self-consciousness and its opposite—subjugated matter. In *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, Madame de Merteuil knows this, and, as a demonstration of the principle, accuses another

notorious libertine of having taken advantage of her. Socially, she stands to gain from an admission of victimization. This particular lie is much emphasized at the end of the novel, during the fall from grace of the marquise. Similarly, *Les Bijoux indiscrets* contains the account of the dissolute Fatmé who attempts to take revenge on her faithless love, Kersael, by accusing him of rape. Fatmé is eventually unmasked by Mangogul, who turns his ring on her in order to hear the truth from her *bijou*.

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