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SEXUAL/TEXTUAL POLITICS IN THE ENLIGHTENMENT: DIDEROT AND D'EPINAY RESPOND TO THOMAS'S ESSAY ON WOMEN

In January, 1772, Antoine-Léonard Thomas, member of the French Academy and habitué of Mme Necker's prestigious salon, published a 140-page treatise titled *Essai sur le caractère, les mœurs et l'esprit des femmes dans les différents siècles.*[1] In it, he proposed to examine women's role and condition in various periods and cultures and to probe to what extent their character, behavior, and capabilities are derived from nature or nurture. After a lengthy historical survey, Thomas returned to his central question: "Si aucune femme ne s'est mise à côté des hommes célèbres, est-ce la faute de l'éducation ou de la nature?" (74) The response he offers is highly ambiguous. Because of their sheltered life, "delicate fibers," and "natural" modesty, women are in his view less able than men to feel and express strong emotions, and hence less able to create great art: "Je demanderai si leurs fibres, plus délicates, ne doivent pas craindre des sensations fortes qui les fatiguent," he asks. "Sauront-elles, comme l'auteur d'Andromaque et de Phèdre exprimer les transports d'une âme troublée qui joint les fureurs à l'amour... ? non: et c'est la nature elle-même qui le leur défend." (75-77) Thomas further maintains that women are less apt to excel in artistic or intellectual pursuits, since the inferiority of their minds is compounded by their "natural" impatience and lack of perseverance. Invoking traditional gender stereotypes and hierarchies (man as active creative principle, woman as passive mirror), he subtly shifts from the physical to the psychological, from the natural to the social, which he presents as mutually reinforcing and mutually justifying:

> L'homme toujours actif est exposé aux orages. L'imagination du poète se nourrit sur la cime des montagnes, aux bords des volcans, sur les mers, sur les champs de bataille... Mais les femmes, par

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1. Antoine-Léonard Thomas, *Essai sur le caractère, les mœurs et l'esprit des femmes dans les différents siècles* (Paris, 1772). Translated in North America as *Essay on the Character, Manners, and Genius of Women in Different Ages*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia, 1774), and later in England as *An Account of the Character, the Manners, and the Understanding of Women in Different Ages and Different Parts of the World* (London: J. Dodsley, 1800). References to this work will be to the 1772 French edition and will be indicated in parentheses within the text.

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> leur vie sédentaire et molle, éprouvant moins le contraste du doux et du terrible, peuvent-elles sentir et peindre, même ce qui est agréable? ... Peut-être leur imagination, quoique vive, ressemble-t-elle au miroir qui réfléchit tout, mais ne crée rien. (76)

In this passage, Thomas extends the notion of separate spheres and the sexual division of labor from the social world to the realm of ideas and artistic creation. He also implicitly adopts the assumptions underlying traditionalist-naturalist discourse[2] on women: that they are by nature inferior to and

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2. In the course of my article, I distinguish four main currents of thought in the gender ideology of eighteenth-century France: the traditionalist-naturalist view, the rationalist view, the feminist view, and the pseudo-feminist view. The dominant current of thought was the traditionalist-naturalist perspective, which was particularly prevalent among jurists, doctors, and moralists, but was also voiced by a number of well-known philosophes and literary figures, including Rousseau, Voltaire, Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, Restif de la Bretonne, and Thomas. The tone of traditionalist arguments about women varied considerably, ranging from openly misogynic diatribes to matter-of-fact exposés of women's inferiority to lyrical idealizations of femininity, motherhood, and domesticity. However, the ideological bases of the arguments were essentially the same. Maintaining that women are by nature inferior to and dependent upon men and that their primary function is to serve as wives and mothers, traditionalists argued that women should be excluded from the public sphere and be relegated to, and educated for, a strictly domestic role.

The other three currents of thought were all in a sense reactions to the oppressive aspects of the traditionalist view of women. These three oppositional currents differed not only in the degree to which they challenged the traditionalist view and in the style of their rhetoric, but more importantly in the socio-political implications of their critiques of dominant gender structures. For rationalists like Montesquieu, d'Alembert, d'Holbach, and Grimm, the oppression of women was simply one form of injustice among many, a theoretical problem they addressed on isolated occasions. In contrast, for feminists like Condorcet, Etta Palm d'Aelders, and Olympe de Gouges, the cause of women was a central preoccupation of their lives and work. They denounced the inequality of women with greater conviction and vigor; their arguments were generally more detailed and systematic than those offered by the rationalists. Going beyond the limited vision of the rationalists, who restricted their efforts to improvements in women's education, these feminists claimed for women not only the right to educational and intellectual equality, but political, legal, and professional equality as well. Combining feminist analysis with political action, they proposed concrete reforms that, if instituted, would have radically transformed the legal status of women and the material conditions of their lives. Mobilized into action by the pressure of events, the feminists of the Revolutionary era took public stands and risked their lives in their fight for equal rights for women.

Among the writers of eighteenth-century France who addressed the "woman question," there was a fourth group that adopted a rhetoric that was feminist in tone, but whose underlying message was basically traditionalist for lack of concrete pro-

dependent upon men, that their primary function is to serve as wives and mothers, and that they should therefore be excluded from the public sphere and educated for a strictly domestic role. Like other traditionalists, Thomas appealed to history, to custom, and above all to nature to justify women's continued subordination.

Although Thomas expresses sympathy for the oppressed condition of women, he in no way challenges traditional gender structures. In fact, his essay tends on the whole only to reinforce misogynic stereotypes: "Par leur nature, [les femmes] sont plus portées à tous les genres de dissimulation," he maintains. "Ouvrez l'Histoire, vous les verrez toujours voisines de l'excès de la pitié ou de la vengeance: il leur manque cette force calme qui sait s'arrêter." (99; 101) Thomas also points to women's intuition, sensitivity, and supernatural gifts, to their schizoid and hysterical tendencies—again implying that these are natural traits and not culturally conditioned ones.[3] A number of his arguments seem to have been borrowed almost word for word from *Emile*. For example, Thomas writes: "La nature a donné à l'un des désirs et le droit d'attaquer; à l'autre, la défense et ces désirs timides qui attirent en résistant." (77)[4] As in Rousseau's writings, the central argument that emerges from Thomas's essay is that the differences and inequalities between the sexes are derived from nature.

After lamenting the moral corruption of eighteenth-century society—due largely, in his view, to a confusion of gender roles and to a disintegration of family ties—Thomas concludes his essay by criticizing his female contemporaries' "unnatural" desire to meddle in politics or to participate in the public sphere in other ways. Echoing Rousseau's rhetoric of moral reform, Thomas

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posals and a genuine desire for change. Beneath the surface of their pseudo-feminist rhetoric lies a subtle paternalism and a tacit complicity with the status quo. Particularly striking examples of pseudo-feminist rhetoric can be found in the works of Helvétius, Diderot, and Laclos.

3. "Leurs sens mobiles parcourent tous les objets; des forces inconnues, des liens secrets, transmettent rapidement à elles toutes les impressions: le monde réel ne leur suffit pas; elles aiment à se créer un monde imaginaire," writes Thomas. "Les spectres, les enchantements, les prodiges, tout ce qui sort des lois ordinaires de la nature, sont leur ouvrage et leurs délices; leur âme s'exalte, et leur esprit est toujours plus près de l'enthousiasme." (Thomas, p. 75)

4. Thomas's statement here echoes the passage in *Emile* where Rousseau writes: "L'art le plus sûr d'animer cette force est de la rendre nécessaire par la résistance. Alors l'amour-propre se joint au désir, et l'un triomphe de la victoire que l'autre lui fait remporter. De là naissent l'attaque et la défense, enfin la modestie et la honte dont la nature arma le faible pour asservir le fort." See *Emile ou de l'éducation* [1764], in *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1969), v. IV, p. 694.

exhorts his women readers to return to their "natural" role as mothers and guardians of domestic virtues in order to bring about the moral regeneration of society. "Malgré nos moeurs, il y a dans ce siècle et dans cette capitale même, des femmes qui honoreraient un autre siècle que le nôtre," he affirms.

> Il y a des épouses tendres qui, jeunes et belles, s'honorent de leurs devoirs, et, dans le plus doux des liens, offrent le spectacle ravissant de l'innocence et de l'amour. Enfin, il y a des mères qui osent être mères... On voit la beauté s'occupant des plus tendres soins de la nature, et tour à tour pressant dans ses bras ou sur son sein le fils qu'elle nourrit de son lait, tandis que l'époux en silence partage ses regards attendris entre le fils et la mère. Oh! si ces exemples pouvaient ramener parmi nous la nature et les moeurs!... Ah! c'est alors que les femmes recouvreraient leur empire. (137-38)[5]

Thomas's essay attracted considerable attention, owing less no doubt to the merits of the essay itself than to the abbé's connections among France's cultural elite. The debate generated by the essay offers a fascinating glimpse into the sexual and textual politics of the French Enlightenment. Among the most spirited responses to Thomas's polemic are Diderot's well-known essay *Sur les femmes* and Mme d'Epinay's lesser known but equally pointed critique in a letter to her friend Galiani. Both pieces were written in March, 1772, a few months after the publication of Thomas's work. In this article, I will compare Diderot and d'Epinay's responses to Thomas's essay as a way of probing the views on women among the French intelligentsia of the period. Given their close friendship and ongoing intellectual exchange,[6] as well as their collaboration as co-directors of *La Correspondance littéraire* during Grimm's prolonged absence in 1771-72, Diderot and d'Epinay may well have been responding as much—if not more—to each other's appraisal of Thomas's essay as to the essay itself.[7] However, my focus will not be on possible biographical

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5. The resemblance to certain passages of *Emile* is of course unmistakable. See in particular pp. 258-59, 585, and 739 in volume 4 of the Pléiade edition of Rousseau's *Œuvres complètes.*

6. In a letter to his mistress Sophie Volland, Diderot underlines the closeness of his friendship with Mme d'Epinay: "Après-demain je suis établi au Granval [the baron d'Holbach's residence] pour six semaines. Mme d'Epinay a eu le cœur un peu serré et moi aussi. Nous étions faits l'un pour l'autre. Nous nous comprenions sans mot dire. Nous blâmions, nous approuvions du coin de lœ il." [Letter to Sophie Volland, 30 Sept. 1760 in *Correspondance*, ed. Georges Roth (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1955), v. III, p. 113.]

7. The chronology of the exchange is as follows: Mme d'Epinay's response to

links between their responses, but rather on the contrast between masculine and feminine styles and perspectives reflected in the texts themselves.

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Diderot's essay *Sur les femmes* first appeared in the *Correspondance littéraire* of April 1, 1772. In it, he chides Thomas for failing to write about women in the proper tone and style, that is, as a *man*. "Il a voulu que son livre ne fût d'aucun sexe; et il n'y a malheureusement que trop bien réussi," writes Diderot. "C'est un hermaphrodite qui n'a ni le nerf de l'homme ni la mollesse de la femme."[8] In a later version, Diderot replaces the word *hermaphrodite* with the stronger and more pejorative term *castrat* (eunuch). He suspects Thomas of having been "trop sage"—a plausible supposition given the fact that he was a priest. Diderot implies that Thomas's lack of intimate contact with women is reflected by the lack of virility and passion in his style and by his inability to portray women as they truly are. "Il n'a pas assez éprouvé de passion...pour les peines dont [la femme] nous console et les plaisirs qu'elle nous donne," maintains Diderot. "Il a beaucoup pensé, mais il n'a pas assez senti... J'aurais écrit avec moins d'impartialité et de sagesse; mais avec... plus d'intérêt et de chaleur." (251) He even calls Thomas an *ingrat* for failing to praise women for the inspiration they provide artists and writers—an ironic allusion perhaps to Thomas's close friendship with Mme Necker, well-known for her role as muse and patroness to the men of letters who gathered in her salon.

In Diderot's view, Thomas's essay lacks pathos: "Avec un peu de douleur et de sensibilité (hé! monsieur Thomas, que ne vous laissiez-vous aller à ces deux qualités?), quel attendrissement ne nous auriez-vous pas inspiré?" (257) Graver still, his style lacks lyricism, vividness, and verve: "Quand on veut écrire des femmes, il faut, monsieur Thomas, tremper sa plume dans l'arc-en-ciel," instructs Diderot. "Il faut être plein de légèreté, de délicatesse et de

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Thomas's essay (published in early January, 1772) was presented in a letter to her friend l'abbé Galiani, written on March 14 of the same year. In a letter to Galiani written a week later (March 22), d'Epinay referred to Diderot's response to Thomas, which she had read and promised to send her Neapolitan friend. Diderot's *Sur les femmes* then appeared a week later in the *Correspondance littéraire*. Given this sequence of events and d'Epinay's close association with Diderot as co-editor of the *Correspondance littéraire* during Grimm's absence from September 1771 through the spring of 1772, it is highly probable that she read Diderot's response to Thomas before she wrote her own and that her letter to Galiani may well have been as much a response to Diderot's views on women as it was to Thomas's.

8. Diderot, *Sur les femmes* in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. J. Assézat (Paris: Garnier, 1875), v. II, p. 251. [All subsequent quotations from this work will be from the 1875 Garnier edition, v. II, pp. 252-62.]

grâces; et ces qualités vous manquent." (260) Diderot deplores the lack of realism and evocative power in the abbé's portrayal of women: "Il ne suffit pas de parler des femmes, et d'en parler bien, monsieur Thomas, faites encore que j'en *voie*," he urges. "Suspendez-les sous mes yeux, comme autant de thermomètres des moindres vicissitudes des mœurs et des usages." (260) Like Rousseau, Voltaire, and numerous other writers of the period, Diderot viewed women's behavior as a direct reflection of the attitudes and mores of the society in which they lived—as a barometer or thermometer of the ambient "climate."[9] According to Diderot, this was a crucial factor which Thomas had largely ignored in his account of women's role in different periods and cultures. Above all, Diderot challenges Thomas's insistence on the need for scholarly detachment when writing about women:

> 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 dans l'entendement des femmes;... et que, plus civilisées que nous en dehors, elles sont restées de vraies sauvages en dedans, toutes machiavélistes. (260)[10]

By remaining sexually neutral in his style and overly impartial in his views, Thomas risked forgetting that he himself was a man whose prime allegiance was to other men in the age-old battle of the sexes.

Diderot's response was designed to remedy the multiple flaws in Thomas's essay by reestablishing the proper line of demarcation between male and female traits—by showing how "a real man" should write about "real women." In contrast to Thomas's patient, scholarly, and sometimes tedious cross-cultural history of women's role and condition, Diderot offers an impassioned hymn to the eternal feminine—a virtuoso rhetorical display, unmistakably male in tone and inspiration. He writes of women not as an impartial, scholarly observer, but as a passionate *amateur du beau sexe*, as well as a novelist with a flair for the dramatic. To counter Thomas's sexually neutral stance, Diderot adopts an aggressively virile tone and style—a dis-

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9. For a provocative discussion of the recurring comparison of women to thermometers in eighteenth-century French and British literature, see Terry Castle's "The Female Thermometer: A Motif of Sexual Passion in Eighteenth-Century Society and Literature," *Representations* 17 (1987): 1-27.

10. Compare this passage with Thomas's list of the traits necessary for writing a good essay on women: "Il faudrait tout à la fois être médecin, anatomiste, philosophe, raisonnable et sensible, et surtout avoir le malheur d'être parfaitement désintéressé." (pp. 103-4)

course imbued with desire, but at the same time undermined by an attitude of fear and scorn toward the very differences he is ostensibly celebrating.

What results is a compendium of misogynic myths and stereotypes—women's inscrutability and stubbornness, their irrepressible curiosity and loquacity, their ignorance and vanity, their irrationality and susceptibility to hysteria, their mystical powers and vindictive plot to dominate men:

> Adressez-vous aux femmes; elles reçoivent promptement, parce qu'elles sont ignorantes; elles répandent avec facilité, parce qu'elles sont légères; elles retiennent longtemps, parce qu'elles sont têtues. Impénétrables dans la dissimulation, cruelles dans la vengeance, constantes dans leurs projets, sans scrupules sur les moyens de réussir, animées d'une haine profonde et secrète contre le despotisme de l'homme, il semble qu'il y ait entre elles un complot facile de domination... Naturellement curieuses, elles veulent tout savoir, soit pour user, soit pour abuser... Celui qui les devine est leur implacable ennemi. Si vous les aimez, elles vous perdront. (253)

Perhaps more than any other single passage from the period, this excerpt from *Sur les femmes* illustrates how one the most progressive thinkers of the Enlightenment remained a prisoner of the gynophobic mentality of the past.

Diderot's passionate engagement in his subject and preoccupation with rhetorical effect tend to obscure his reasoning in *Sur les femmes* and cause him to neglect substance and organization. When compared with Thomas's carefully structured, well-rounded analyses and arguments, Diderot's essay appears disjointed, even chaotic. He jumps from one observation to another in a haphazard, impressionistic manner, often without any transition from one sentence to the next. For example, toward the end of his essay, Diderot writes:

> Le symbole des femmes en général est celle de l'Apocalypse, sur le front de laquelle il est écrit: MYSTÈRE. Où il y a un mur d'airain pour nous, il n'y a souvent qu'une toile d'araignée pour elles. On a demandé si les femmes étaient faites pour l'amitié. Il y a des femmes qui sont hommes, et des hommes qui sont femmes; et j'avoue que je ne ferai jamais mon ami d'un homme-femme. Si nous avons plus de raison que les femmes, elles ont bien plus d'instinct que nous. La seule chose qu'on leur ait apprise, c'est à bien porter la feuille de figuier qu'elles ont reçue de leur première aïeule. (260)

Here, as throughout *Sur les femmes*, Diderot's style tends to be terse, elliptical, jerky, and emotionally charged, propelled forward by a driving rhythm. In contrast to Thomas's long-winded and uniformly plodding style, Diderot's essay is fast-paced from the beginning and accelerates to an almost frenzied

speed at the end, punctuated by short, choppy sentences. In a mere ten pages, Diderot seems to cover more ground and certainly generates more excitement than Thomas in his exhaustive 140-page treatise.

Arguments are clearly secondary for Diderot, who largely ignores the substance of Thomas's essay in order to focus on questions of style and rhetoric. In fact, he often appropriates Thomas's unoriginal arguments as his own, but presents them in a far more passionate, entertaining manner. In several cases, he selects a dull anecdote or abstract idea from Thomas's essay and dramatizes it by casting it into dialogue form or first-person narrative. For example, to illustrate the oppression of women in primitive societies, Thomas had simply written: "Les femmes sont chez les Indiens ce que les Ilotes étaient chez les Spartiates, un peuple vaincu. Aussi a-t-on vu, sur les rives de l'Orénoque, des mères, par pitié, étouffer leurs filles en naissant."[11] Diderot expands this brief example into a dramatic dialogue between an Indian woman and a Jesuit missionary, who reproaches her for the death of her infant daughter. The dialogue is introduced by a prefatory remark in which Diderot plays with his audience, daring them to remain unmoved by the pathos of the woman's plight: "La femme, malheureuse dans les villes, est plus malheureuse encore au fond des forêts. Ecoutez le discours d'une Indienne des rives de l'Orénoque; et écoutez-le, si vous pouvez, sans en être ému."[12] Building on the drab plot line provided by Thomas, Diderot heightens the story's dramatic effect by using first-person narrative and by fleshing in the characters and personalizing their experiences. Similarly, in another passage, Diderot dramatizes Thomas's dull warnings about the dangers of *la galanterie* and increases their didactic impact by offering a biting caricature of heartless rakes and their rhetoric of seduction.[13] By far the most memorable passages in Diderot's essay are his vivid descriptions of female mysticism, divination, and hysteria (discussed below), which contrast sharply with Thomas's abstract and colorless allusions to these same phenomena.[14]

In certain passages of his essay, Diderot evokes with compassion and realistic detail the miseries of his women contemporaries—the repressive and debilitating education to which they are subjected, the unhappiness caused by arranged marriages to despotic husbands, the discomforts of pregnancy and perils of childbirth, the loneliness of old age:

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11. Thomas, pp. 2-3.

12. Diderot, *Sur les femmes*, p. 258.

13. Compare Thomas, p. 33, with Diderot, p. 261.

14. Compare Diderot, pp. 255-57, with Thomas, pp. 38-42 and 74-75.

> Pendant une longue suite d'années, chaque lune ramènera le même malaise. Le moment qui la délivrera du despotisme de ses parents est arrivé; son imagination s'ouvre à un avenir plein de chimères. Réjouis-toi bien, malheureuse créature, le temps aurait sans cesse affaibli la tyrannie que tu quittes; le temps accroîtra sans cesse la tyrannie sous laquelle tu vas passer. On lui choisit un époux. Elle devient mère. L'état de grossesse est pénible pour presque toutes les femmes. C'est dans les douleurs, au péril de leur vie, aux dépens de leurs charmes, et souvent au détriment de leur santé, qu'elles donnent naissance à des enfants... L'âge avance; la beauté passe; arrivent les années de l'abandon, de l'humeur et de l'ennui... Négligée de son époux, délaissée par ses enfants, nulle dans la société, la dévotion est son unique et dernière ressource. (257-58)

Diderot concludes this poignant tableau of female miseries with a blanket indictment of laws and practices that oppress women: "Dans presque toutes les contrées, la cruauté des lois civiles s'est réunie contre les femmes à la cruauté de la nature. Elles ont été traitées comme des enfants imbéciles. Nulle sorte de vexations que l'homme ne puisse exercer impunément contre la femme." (258)

Although Diderot depicts the plight of his female contemporaries with compassion and eloquence, his impassioned claims are undermined by a profound ambivalence toward women reflected in what Fauchery calls a "rhetoric of contradiction."[15] He describes woman as "un être extrême dans sa force et sa faiblesse" (251) and later adds: "C'est surtout dans la passion de l'amour, les accès de la jalousie, les transports de la tendresse maternelle, les instants de la superstition,... que les femmes étonnent, belles commes les séraphins, terribles comme les diables... La femme dominée par l'hystérisme éprouve je ne sais quoi d'infernal ou de céleste." (252; 256)[16] This rhetoric

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15. Pierre Fauchery, *La Destinée féminine dans le roman européen du dix-huitième siècle, 1713-1807. Essai de gynécomythie romanesque* (Paris: Colin, 1972), p. 553.

16. Later, describing the development of girls in their adolescence, Diderot observes: "C'est à cet instant critique qu'une jeune fille devient ce qu'elle restera toute sa vie, pénétrante ou stupide, triste ou gaie, sérieuse ou légère, bonne ou méchante, l'espérance de sa mère trompée ou réalisée." This passage in *Sur les femmes* recalls the debate on women between Jacques and his master: "Et les voilà embarqués dans une querelle interminable sur les femmes; l'un prétendant qu'elles étaient bonnes, l'autre méchantes: et ils avaient tous deux raison; l'un sottes, l'autre pleines d'esprit... l'un avares, l'autre libérales...l'un bavardes, l'autre discrètes; l'un franches, l'autre dissimulées; l'un ignorantes, l'autre éclairées; l'un sages, l'autre libertines; l'un folles, l'autre sensées... et ils avaient tous deux raison." See *Jacques le fataliste et son maître* (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1970), p. 45.

of contradiction reflects not only an ambivalence toward woman, but also a desire to define and dominate her, to reduce her to simple epithets and formulas. Elsewhere, however, Diderot admits that the character of woman eludes him: "Le symbole des femmes en général est celle de l'Apocalypse, sur le front de laquelle il est écrit: MYSTERE." (260) Yet in recognizing his powerlessness to define woman, Diderot is merely invoking another hackneyed gender stereotype: the old myth of female inscrutability.

Because of the ambivalence and ambiguity that pervade *Sur les femmes*, Diderot's essay is a striking illustration of pseudo-feminist rhetoric. Oscillating continually between an attitude of sympathy and scorn for women, between images of idealization and vituperation, Diderot (like Thomas) leaves the reader perplexed and uncertain as to his true beliefs. One has the impression that *Sur les femmes* is a mere exercise in rhetoric intended less to persuade, than to impress and entertain. Although Diderot writes of the oppression of women with sympathy and at times with considerable eloquence and perspicacity, he offers no concrete solutions nor even any genuine hope for change. In fact, the predominant impression conveyed in *Sur les femmes* is that, regardless of circumstances, women could not be any different. For in Diderot's view, they were prisoners of their sex and of innate physical disabilities. He was careful to point out that his female contemporaries were prone to hysteria and to incurable diseases of the breasts and uterus (all specifically "female" ailments). In accordance with his sensationalist philosophy, Diderot argued that women's inferior mental capabilities and emotional instability were merely extensions of the weakness of the female body—itself a result not of cultural conditioning, but of nature. This attitude is expressed half-jokingly, half-seriously in a letter from Diderot to his mistress Sophie Volland, in which he chides her for being overly emotional: "O femme, serez-vous toujours femme par quelque endroit? Jamais la fêlure que nature vous fit ne se reprendra-t-elle entièrement?"[17]

Like Thomas, Diderot invokes the ambiguous notion of nature—"cette grosse bête dont on parle toujours sans savoir ce que c'est," as Sade once remarked—to highlight the biological specificity of women and to justify their subordination. Both implicitly adopt naturalist discourse on women and the traditional association of difference with inferiority. Diderot's essay *Sur les femmes*, like his *Eléments de physiologie*, reflects the belief—commonplace in medical circles of the period—that the uterus was the source of a wide

17. Diderot, letter to Sophie Volland, 30 Sept. 1760, in *Correspondance*, v. III, p. 113. The comparison of the vagina to a wound reflects the view still prevalent in the Enlightenment that woman was a botched male, not only physically (through lack of a penis), but also morally and intellectually (through lack of such "virile" qualities as courage, virtue, intelligence, and moderation).

range of psychological phenomena, including hallucinations, religious revelations, prophetic visions, and a whole gamut of psychosomatic illnesses (referred to collectively as *hystérie* or *vapeurs*):

> 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 de l'organe propre à son sexe que partent toutes ces idées extraordinaires... Rien de plus contigu que l'extase, la vision, la prophétie, la révélation, et l'hystérisme... La femme dominée par l'hystérisme éprouve je ne sais quoi d'infernal ou de céleste. Quelquefois, elle m'a fait frissonner. C'est dans la fureur de la bête féroce qui fait partie d'elle-même que je l'ai vue, que je l'ai entendue. (255-56)[18]

Going back to Plato and before, this myth of the wandering uterus reflects the awe and terror experienced by the male psyche when confronted with the mystery of procreation and by the threat of female difference. By reducing woman to her sex, writers like Diderot hoped to contain her powers, but in fact their obsession with female sexuality served only to magnify its force within the male imagination.

Despite his generally optimistic view of the potential for social progress, Diderot remained pessimistic about the possibility of improvements in the female condition. For him, society's cruelty toward women was merely a continuation of the cruelty of nature. His solution to their plight was therefore no solution at all: "Femmes, que je vous plains! Il n'y avait qu'un dédommagement à vos maux; et si j'avais été législateur, peut-être l'eussiez-vous obtenu. Affranchies de toute servitude, je vous aurais mises au-dessus de la

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18. Just as the dominant image of women in eighteenth-century French legal discourse was that of *la mineure perpétuelle*, the dominant image in the medical discourse of the period was that of *l'éternelle malade*. Both fields were dominated by a traditionalist view of sexual difference rooted in biological determinism. In much of the medical literature of the period, women are portrayed as physically and psychologically weak and inferior, as victims to the imperious, uncontrollable urges of their body—particularly of their uterus. For example, Théophile de Bordeu, the distinguished doctor and friend of the Encyclopédistes, writes: "Quel est le médecin qui n'a pas été témoin des ravages causés par la matrice? Son département qui est très étendu, la rend source de bien des maux. Dans l'âge moyen, elle a son empire particulier qu'elle exerce; elle donne des lois, se mutine, entre en fureur et resserre et étrangle les autres parties." [Théophile de Bordeu, *Recherches sur les maladies chroniques* (1774), in *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Caille et Ravier, 1818), p. 853.] This passage is repeated almost word for word in Diderot's *Eléments de physiologie* (see his *Œuvres complètes*, ed. J. Assézat, v. 9, p. 426). Bordeu's comparison of the uterus to a *bête féroce* also recurs in Diderot's *Sur les femmes* in the passage cited above.

loi; vous auriez été sacrées en quelque endroit que vous eussiez paru." (260)[19] Diderot alludes vaguely to what he might do if were a legislator, but proposes no concrete reforms. Moreover, his desire to put women on a pedestal—"above the law"—merely perpetuates old idealizing myths and pseudo-feminist rhetoric. While it is true that Diderot was not a legislator, as an influential author and chief editor of *L'Encyclopédie*, he was nevertheless in a position to enlighten public opinion and to influence people in positions of power. That he made no use of his influence on behalf of women is significant. Lacking the social criticism and reformist impulse that distinguish his political and philosophical works, Diderot's writings on women serve on the whole only to reinforce the status quo. The limited education he gave to his beloved daughter and only child Angélique, the fact that her whole upbringing was geared to marriage and motherhood, is further evidence of his conservative views on women.[20]

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19. Commenting on this passage, Albistur and Armogathe remark: "Le mythe du 'sacre de la femme' qu'il contribue à perpétuer n'apporte pas grand-chose à la condition concrète des femmes. Et il est un peu trop facile d'affirmer: 'Si j'étais législateur ... je ferais...' A une époque où la littérature se fait militante, il ne propose rien d'autre que le maintien du *statu quo*. On ne découvre dans sa défense des femmes aucune des hardiesses qui étaient celles du penseur politique ou du philosophe social. Dans ce domaine, il n'a pris visiblement aucun risque." [Maïté Albistur and Daniel Armogathe, *L'Histoire du féminisme français* (Paris: Editions des femmes, 1977), v. 1, p. 275.]

20. Commenting on Angélique's education, Eva Jacobs observes: "The fact that he disapproved of marriage as an institution, that his own marriage was disastrous for both himself and his wife, that he knew many gifted unmarried women who managed to earn their living, none of all this seems to have influenced his conviction that Angélique's sole purpose in life was to obtain a husband. With a limited aim in view, a limited education was appropriate." See Eva Jacobs, "Diderot and the Education of Girls," in *Women and Society in Eighteenth-Century France*, ed. Jacobs et al. (London: Athlone Press, 1979), p. 90. For further discussion of Diderot's views on women, see Elisabeth de Fontenay, "Diderot gynéconome," *Digraphe* 7 (1976): 29-50; Rita Goldberg, *Sex and Enlightenment: Women in Richardson and Diderot* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Alice Laborde, "Diderot: Amour et propriété," *Stanford French Review* 1 (1977): 367-78, and her "Mme de Puisieux et Diderot: De l'égalité entre les sexes," *SVEC* 216 (1983); Blandine McLaughlin, "Diderot and Women," in *French Women in the Age of Enlightenment*, ed. Samia I. Spencer (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), pp. 296-308; Robert Niklaus, "Diderot and Women," in Jacobs, pp. 69-82; Adriana Sfragaro, "La représentation de la femme chez Diderot," *SVEC* 193 (1980): 1893-98; and Paul Hoffmann, *La Femme dans la pensée des Lumières* (Paris: Editions Ophrys, 1977), 488-538.

Quite a different response to Thomas's essay is found in a letter from Mme d'Epinay to her friend Galiani dated March 14 of the same year. In the course of her letter, d'Epinay presents a vigorous critique of Thomas's views on women, as well as of his style of argumentation and rhetoric. "Cela ne me paraît qu'un pompeux bavardage, bien éloquent, un peu pédant et très monotone," she writes.

> On ne sait, quand on l'a lu, ce que l'auteur pense et si son opinion sur les femmes est autre que les opinions reçues... Il discute un peu sèchement ce qu'elles doivent à la nature, à l'institution de la société et à l'éducation, et ensuite, en les montrant telles qu'elles sont, il attribue sans cesse à la nature ce que nous tenons évidemment de l'éducation ou de l'institution. Et puis tant de lieux communs. Sont-elles plus sensibles? Plus sûres en amitié que les hommes? Sont-elles ceci? sont-elles cela?... Combien tous ces détails sont petits, communs, et peu philosophiques![21]

In contrast to Diderot's response to Thomas, which only reiterates the same misogynic and idealizing stereotypes, using the same pseudo-feminist rhetoric, d'Epinay carefully deconstructs each of Thomas's main arguments and points to the contradictions underlying them. For example, in response to Thomas's claim that women are "by nature" more easily agitated than men and more inclined to political intrigue and to pettiness, d'Epinay argued that these personality traits were the result not of women's nature, but of their social conditioning—their exclusion from constructive occupations and from the right to participate openly in the public sphere. She points to the pettiness and "disposition inquiète" common in both nunneries and monasteries to demonstrate the effect of idleness and separation from public life on the character of men and women alike:

> Puisque vous vouliez être scientifique, c'était là le cas d'examiner si cette disposition inquiète, qu'elles tiennent de la nature, leur est particulière et ne se trouve pas également chez les hommes; si les

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21. Letter from d'Epinay to Galiani, 14 March 1772, in *La Signora d'Epinay e l'Abate Galiani. Lettere inedite (1769-1772)*, ed. Fausto Nicolini (Bari, Italy: Gius. Laterza & Figli, 1929), pp. 251-52. All further quotations from this letter will be from this edition of the d'Epinay-Galiani correspondence, pp. 251-55. For an engaging account of d'Epinay's long-standing friendship and correspondence with Galiani, see Francis Steegmuller's recently published *A Woman, a Man, and Two Kingdoms: The Story of Madame d'Epinay and the Abbé Galiani* (New York: Knopf, 1992). Also see Ruth Plaut Weinreb's excellent study *Eagle in a Gauze Cage: Louise d'Epinay, femme de lettres* (New York: AMS Press, 1993).

> hommes dénués, comme elles, d'occupations sérieuses, exclus des affaires, et étrangers à tous les grands objets, n'étaleraient pas cette même disposition inquiète... La preuve en est qu'elle ne se remarque nulle part autant que chez les moines et dans les maisons religieuses. (253)

Turning the tables on Thomas, d'Epinay shows what men in general would be like if they were confined to the narrow concerns of the domestic sphere, as he felt all women should be.

D'Epinay also disputes Thomas's claim that women are less courageous and persistent than men: "On a vu, dit M. Thomas, dans de grands dangers, des exemples d'un grand courage chez les femmes; mais [selon lui] c'est toujours lorsqu'une grande passion ou une idée qui les remue fortement les enlève à elles-mêmes. Mais le courage est-il autre chose chez les hommes?" she asks (252). She insists that if girls were given the same opportunities and incentives as boys, there would be as many courageous women as men: "L'opinion ou l'ambition sont ce qui les remue fortement. Attachez, dans l'institution et dans l'éducation des femmes, le même préjugé de valeur, il se trouvera autant de femmes courageuses que d'hommes." (252) To support her argument, d'Epinay draws on realistic details from everyday life. Alluding to the pain and discomfort endured by women during pregnancy and childbirth, she writes:

> De la somme générale des maux physiques répandus sur la terre, les femmes en ont plus de deux tiers en partage. Elles les supportent avec infiniment plus de constance et de courage que les hommes. Il n'y a là ni préjugé ni vanité qui soutienne: la constitution physique est même devenue par l'éducation plus faible que celle de l'homme. (252)

She then concludes: "Le courage est un don de la nature chez elles tout comme chez les hommes... On pourrait, avec bien plus d'avantages, faire le même calcul sur les peines morales." (252-53) By underlining the fundamental similarity of character between men and women, d'Epinay seeks to challenge the traditional gender distinctions and hierarchies underlying Thomas's view of women.

Above all, d'Epinay contests Thomas's argument that the physical and intellectual inferiority of her female contemporaries resulted from nature. She maintains that women are by nature as strong as men both mentally and physically and become weaker only through their education and upbringing. In a bold affirmation of equality, she declares:

> Les hommes et les femmes sont de même nature et de même constitution. La preuve en est que les femmes sauvages sont aussi robustes, aussi agiles que les hommes sauvages: ainsi la faiblesse

> de notre constitution et de nos organes appartient certainement à notre éducation et est une suite de la condition qu'on nous a assignée dans la société... Les vertus que l'on a voulu donner aux femmes en général sont presque toutes des vertus contre nature, qui ne produisent que de petites vertus factices et des vices très réels. (254)

This last sentence constitutes an implicit attack on the ideals of "feminine" delicacy, modesty, and self-effacement advocated so strongly by traditionalists like Thomas and Rousseau—ideals that, in d'Epinay's view, forced women to repress their ambitions and talents and to seek frivolous and sometimes pernicious outlets for their energies. She maintained that the natural equality between the sexes could not be restored until these artificial and oppressive gender ideals were overcome. However, she recognized that changing such deeply rooted social structures would be difficult, particularly since the whole gender hierarchy was founded on male self-interest:

> Il faudrait sans doute plusieurs générations pour nous remettre telles que la nature nous fit. Nous pourrions, peut-être, y gagner; mais les hommes y perdraient trop. Ils sont bien heureux que nous ne soyons pas pires que nous ne sommes, après tout ce qu'ils ont fait pour nous dénaturer par leurs belles institutions... Il ne nous faut plus que des têtes neuves pour nous faire envisager les objets sous des points de vue différents. (255)

Denouncing male complicity with the status quo as the single greatest obstacle to greater equality between the sexes, d'Epinay pointed to the need for a fresh outlook in order to see gender differences for what they really are—cultural constructs and not reflections of nature.

While Diderot presented no program for social reform in *Sur les femmes* and simply equated women's nature with existing roles and stereotypes, Thomas and d'Epinay each had a definite program of social reform in mind. Both appealed to nature as an ideal and as a norm—as a lost paradise that women should strive to restore in order to recover their true identity. Yet their visions of this "true nature" are diametrically opposed. For d'Epinay, in "nature" women are equal to men in potential strengths and weaknesses, rights and responsibilities. They had become "denatured," she claimed, through the debilitating influence of educational practices and social institutions designed to preserve male power over women. According to Thomas, however, in "nature" women are relegated to the domestic sphere. Dwelling nostalgically on the domestic virtues of the women of Antiquity, he pointed to Classical Greece and the early Roman Empire as ideal societies because of their strict segregation of the sexes into separate spheres. In Thomas's view, his female contemporaries had become "denatured" by their rejection of conjugal fidelity, motherhood, and domesticity—their true destiny. They

were, moreover, largely responsible for their own fall from nature through their desire for illicit power, a desire to be like men through participation in the public sphere. D'Epinay, on the other hand, argued that women had been denatured largely by men who, through self-interest, wished to deprive them of their natural rights and innate potential.

Like other feminists and rationalists of her period, d'Epinay saw improved education as the key to future equality for women and as a means for her female contemporaries to achieve a certain degree of inner freedom despite the persistence of external inequalities. But unlike Thomas, Diderot, and other male sympathizers with the plight of women, d'Epinay was not content to remain at the level of theory and generalizations in her denunciation of oppressive gender structures. In *Mme de Montbrillant*, her autobiographical novel, she drew on her own experiences to illustrate in vivid detail the economic, legal, and educational inequality of women and the stultifying effects of the roles and conventions imposed on them. In many ways, *Mme de Montbrillant* can be read as a survival handbook for eighteenth-century women in their struggle to find happiness and self-fulfillment in spite of unhappy and indissoluble marriages, woefully inadequate educations, repressive social conventions, and all the traps and contradictions of the double standard. In the course of her novel, d'Epinay laments the woeful inadequacy of her education, the spirit of dependence and submission inculcated in her by her mother, and, above all, the lack of self-confidence that resulted from her upbringing. That her novel was intended as a critique of the traditional upbringing and education of women is made clear in the preface:

> Ces mémoires doivent servir de leçon aux mères de famille. On y verra le danger d'une éducation timide et incertaine, et la nécessité d'étudier le caractère d'un enfant pour former un plan d'éducation invariable. Celle qu'avait reçue Mme de Montbrillant avait si bien déguisé ou affaibli ses dispositions naturelles qu'il a fallu un nombre d'années passées dans le malheur pour lui rendre la fermeté de son caractère.[22]

To help women provide a sounder education for themselves and their daughters, d'Epinay also published *Les Conversations d'Emilie*, a series of twenty dialogues that provide detailed, practical advice for the upbringing and instruction of girls by their mothers at home. Patterned after conversations between d'Epinay and her granddaughter Emilie, whom she raised, the dialogues challenge the limited education traditionally given to women: "Je ne

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22. Louise d'Epinay, *Mme de Montbrillant*, ed. Georges Roth (Paris: Gallimard, 1951), v. I, p. 4.

me permets point de fixer les bornes du savoir aux personnes de notre sexe," she declares. Recalling her own childhood, she laments the stultifying education given to the women of her generation:

> Du temps de mon enfance ce n'était pas l'usage de rien apprendre aux filles. On leur enseignait les devoirs de religion tant bien que mal, pour les mettre en état de faire leur première communion. On leur donnait un fort bon maître à danser, un fort mauvais maître de musique, et tout au plus un médiocre maître de dessin. Avec cela un peu d'histoire et de géographie, mais sans aucun attrait; il ne s'agissait que de retenir des noms et des dates, qu'on oubliait... Voilà à quoi se réduisaient les éducations soignées. Surtout on ne nous parlait jamais raison; et quant à la science, on la trouvait très déplacée dans les personnes de notre sexe, et l'on évitait avec soin toute espèce d'instruction.[23]

In reaction to the narrow, oppressive education she herself was given and to the spirit of dependence and submission it engendered in her, d'Epinay resolved to raise her granddaughter to be an intelligent, independently minded woman capable of finding happiness and fulfillment in herself.

The true originality of *Les Conversations d'Emilie* lies less in the plan or method of studies it proposes (which in fact resembles the more enlightened educations given to boys in the period) than in the distinctly feminocentric goals it seeks to achieve and, above all, in the self-confidence and self-sufficiency it aims to foster in women: "Lorsque vous portez vos soins à cultiver votre raison, à l'orner de connaissances utiles et solides, vous vous ouvrez autant de sources nouvelles de plaisir et de satisfaction," explains d'Epinay to her granddaughter.

> Vous vous préparez autant de moyens d'embellir votre vie, autant de ressources contre l'ennui, autant de consolations dans l'adversité, que vous acquérez de talents et de connaissances. Ce sont des biens que personne ne peut vous enlever, qui vous affranchissent de la dépendance des autres, puisque vous n'en avez pas besoin pour vous occuper et pour être heureuse... Sans compter que c'est le remède le plus efficace contre le désœuvrement, qui est l'ennemi le plus redoutable du bonheur et de la vertu... Ainsi, voilà du profit tout clair: liberté et force. [24]

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23. Louise d'Epinay, *Les Conversations d'Emilie* (Paris: Belin, 1783), Conversation 12, v. I, pp. 442-43.

24. *Ibid.*, pp. 466-67; 469.

In recognition of her important contributions to the field of women's education, d'Epinay was awarded the Montyon Prix d'Utilité by the Académie Française shortly before her death in 1783.

The progressive education given by d'Epinay to her granddaughter forms a striking contrast with the limited education Diderot gave his daughter. Moreover, in a period in which education was a primary concern, one is surprised to find that Diderot wrote so little on the subject, as Eva Jacobs has remarked.[25] In contrast to d'Epinay's efforts to challenge traditional gender stereotypes and hierarchies, Diderot rarely ventured beyond them. If one examines his portrayals of women (particularly in *La Religieuse*, *Les Bijoux indiscrets*, and the various *contes*), one finds a recurrence of the same naturalist/pseudo-feminist rhetoric as in his essay *Sur les femmes*.

In an article comparing Diderot's and d'Epinay's responses to Thomas, Michèle Duchet argues that Diderot's critique of Thomas's essay is more original and more "feminist" than d'Epinay's. "A sa manière, elle est, comme Thomas, prise au piège des idées reçues, et son texte n'est que l'envers de l'idéologie dominante," writes Duchet.

> L'argument principal de l'égalité des femmes élude tout simplement le problème de la différence des sexes comme lieu d'un conflit et comme ligne de partage du discours. En traçant cette ligne de partage, Diderot, au contraire, se donne la liberté d'un autre discours sur les femmes, avec la hardiesse du philosophe qui s'écarte des opinions reçues pour examiner la nature des choses.

Duchet then concludes: "L'insignifiance de la lettre de Mme d'Epinay, qui ne sort pas des banalités philosophiques et reste neutre, le montre assez, et il serait difficile de trouver au XVIII[e] siècle des textes au féminin où le féminin cherche à se dire."[26] I would argue, quite to the contrary, that d'Epinay's response to Thomas constitutes an exemplary "texte au féminin" expressing a distinctly feminine—and indeed feminist—point of view. In contrast to Diderot's and Thomas' prescriptive, stereotypical pronouncements concerning women, d'Epinay's views and style are grounded in her experience as a woman and evoke with vivid realism the condition and aspirations of her female contemporaries.

Echoing Diderot's criticism of Thomas's essay on women, Duchet maintains that d'Epinay's response is sexually neutral and hence lacking in conviction and persuasiveness. However, in comparing their responses, Duchet judges

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25. Jacobs, op. cit., pp. 94-95.

26. Michèle Duchet, "Du sexe des livres: *Sur les femmes* de Diderot," in *Revue des Sciences Humaines* XLIV, 168 (Oct.-Dec. 1977): 535-36.

their rhetoric by its tone rather than by its substance and ignores the very different type of audience for which they were writing. Written for the highly sophisticated readership of the *Correspondance littéraire*, Diderot's essay was intended less to enlighten and persuade than to impress and entertain. He was responding less to Thomas's essay per se, than using it as a springboard for his own, indeed as a mere pretext for a virtuoso display of wit and rhetoric. Furthermore, from the very beginning of his essay, Diderot makes it abundantly clear that he is addressing a male audience: "Thomas n'a pas assez éprouvé une passion que je prise davantage pour les peines dont elle nous console que pour les plaisirs qu'elle nous donne... Je me serais occupé avec plus d'intérêt et de chaleur du seul être de la nature qui nous rende sentiment pour sentiment." (251) Later Diderot warns his readers to be wary of women: "Si vous les aimez, elles vous perdront." (253) The *nous* and *vous* he is addressing is unmistakably—and exclusively—male. Moreover, Diderot was well aware of the fact that his male readership shared his traditionalist view of women's nature and role—a view not substantially different from Thomas's. He therefore attacked Thomas not on the level of substance, but in terms of style and tone. D'Epinay's response, on the other hand, was written for a private audience, for her close friend l'abbé Galiani, whose views on women (like Thomas's and Diderot's) she knew were more traditionalist than her own.[27] Hence her oscillation between a half-apologetic, half-aggressive tone, fearful of offending him, yet determined to defend her own views on women. She underlines the privateness of her exchange with Galiani, as if to excuse the sharp criticisms she allows herself to express: "Je vous dirai, comme de coutume, tout ce qui me passera par la tête, pourvu que mon avis reste entre vous et moi," she warns him in advance. Having finished Thomas's essay, she confesses her disappointment, but again stresses the confidential nature of the critique she is about to present: "Hé bien! je l'ai lu et je me garderai de dire à d'autres qu'à vous ce que j'en pense, ni de prendre dans le monde un ton aussi tranché; mais je vous avoue que cela ne me paraît qu'un pompeux bavardage, bien éloquent, un peu pédant et très monotone." (121) In a curious reversal of conventional gender roles, d'Epinay adopts a blunt tone, a laconic style, and incisive argumentation—traits traditionally considered "masculine," while ascribing traits traditionally considered "feminine" to Thomas: loquacity, pretension, superficiality, facile charm, and a general lack of seriousness, of direction, and of originality:

> On y trouve quelques petites phrases pomponnées, de ces phrases qui, entendues dans un cercle, font dire de leur auteur, le jour et

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27. Galiani's traditionalist view of women is reflected in his *Dialogue sur les femmes*, which he sent to d'Epinay in response to her critique of Thomas. See *Dialogue sur les femmes*, in *Lettres de Galiani*, ed. Lucien Perey and Gaston Maugras (Paris: Calmann Lévy, 1881), v. II, pp. 50-62

> le lendemain: Il a de l'esprit comme un ange, il est charmant! Mais, quand je les trouve dans un ouvrage qui a la prétention d'être grave, j'ai bien de la peine à m'en contenter. Celui-ci n'a point de résultat. (251)

Later in her letter, d'Epinay addresses her criticisms to Thomas directly: "Votre ouvrage n'est point du tout philosophique, vous n'examinez rien en grand, et encore une fois je ne vous vois point de but." (252) Ironically, these are all criticisms that Thomas himself levels at women writers and intellectuals in his discussion of *les femmes bel esprit* and *les précieuses*. Thus, while Diderot claims that Thomas's style is "asexual" and "unmanly," d'Epinay suggests that it is "effeminate." To complicate the picture, Duchet describes Diderot's style as more "feminine" and "feminist" than d'Epinay's supposedly neutral or "pseudo-male" style. All these apparent gender reversals point to the problematic nature of such gender distinctions and to the subjectivity—indeed the utter uselessness—of the terms "masculine" and "feminine" when applied to questions of style and character.

Duchet mistakes Diderot's pseudo-feminist rhetoric as feminist and fails to recognize the significance of d'Epinay's insights, particularly given the period in which she was writing. Because d'Epinay's style is less dramatic and less original than Diderot's, Duchet dismisses her ideas as less original as well. I would argue, quite to the contrary that d'Epinay's ideas are far more original—and certainly far more progressive and feminist—than Diderot's. In contrast to the traditionalist, stereotypical images of women presented by Diderot and Thomas, d'Epinay offers a rationalist view of women's nature and condition grounded in her own experience and observations. In contrast to Diderot's and Thomas's backward-looking view of women's destiny, d'Epinay presents a forward-looking view that seeks to transcend the narrow gender roles and distinctions imposed by eighteenth-century society. She dares to challenge the status quo and the male self-interest that Thomas and Diderot only seek to perpetuate.

The contrast between the naturalist/pseudo-feminist rhetoric of Diderot and Thomas on the one hand and d'Epinay's rationalist/feminist stance on the other provides illuminating insights into the gender ideology of the French Enlightenment. Moreover, their views present striking parallels with current debates regarding gender differences: whether such differences derive from nature or culture and whether they should be minimized or exalted. Thomas and Diderot both anticipate the position expressed by advocates of *écriture féminine* (like Cixous and Irigaray) that women's identity should be heightened through a glorification of sex/gender differences—a position paradoxically echoed by present-day traditionalists like Phyllis Schafly. On the other hand, d'Epinay's response to Thomas anticipates the argument advanced by feminist activists like de Beauvoir and Friedan that women should strive to minimize or transcend sex/gender differences in order to achieve social and political equality.

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