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Anthony J. La Vopa, *The Labor of the Mind: Intellect and Gender in Enlightenment Cultures*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017. x + 350 pp. Notes and index. \$79.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 9780812249286; \$79.95 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9780812294187.

Review by Joanna Stalnaker, Columbia University.

Consider a thought experiment in the Enlightenment tradition. Imagine a reader comes across a book entitled *The Manly Mind*, with a portrait of David Hume (or Nicolas Malebranche, or Anthony Ashley Cooper, third earl of Shaftesbury, or Denis Diderot) gracing its cover. The reader would not be surprised in perusing the opening pages of this book to discover that its topic is “the discursive formation of the manly mind in the age of politeness” (p. 2). Nor would it come as a surprise that “this book focuses on texts written by men,” with five chapters devoted exclusively to male authors and another three with only a fraction of the text devoted to “the ways in which women in their circles challenged their perceptions” (p. 2). It would likewise seem perfectly natural that the central theme of friendship running throughout the book should be conceived “as an intimate exchange of intelligence between men and between men and women” (p. 14). Friendships (and intellectual exchanges) between women would bear no mention because this is a book concerned with the manly mind, and women (as the cartoonist and graphic memoirist Alison Bechdel knew when she penned the comic that inspired the Bechdel Test) tend to talk about entirely different subjects when men are not involved. [1]

Now consider the book Anthony J. La Vopa has actually written, *The Labor of the Mind: Intellect and Gender in Enlightenment Cultures*. This book has a portrait of Louise d'Épinay, the writer and salon hostess who collaborated most closely with the luminaries of the French Enlightenment, Diderot, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Friedrich Melchior, Baron von Grimm, on its cover. The reader of this book could reasonably expect that equal weight would be given to conceptions of mind formulated by male and female writers, whether manly, feminine, or neither of the above. She might be disconcerted, or even dismayed, to find a mere twelve pages devoted to d'Épinay in a 350-page book, or an even more meager four pages devoted to another of the three women featured in the book, the writer and salon hostess Anne-Thérèse de Marguenat de Courcelles, Marquise de Lambert. She might also expect that friendship and intellectual partnerships would not be treated as necessarily centering around men, or at the very least that some justification for ignoring the very category of female friendship would be offered. As a reader of Dena Goodman's *Republic of Letters*, she would know that the salon hostesses of eighteenth-century France formed deep bonds and worked in close collaboration with each other, and might expect those relationships, and the conceptions of mind that emerged from them, to be given their due. [2] Above all, she might expect women writers to be interpreted not through the narrow lens of their responses to dominant male texts and paradigms, but on their own terms and in their own right. All the more so that the author of this book is committed to “giving the historical study of thinking about intelligence a critical edge” (p. 298).

The purpose of this thought experiment is to make the point that if La Vopa's book disappoints, it is above all because it creates a set of expectations in its readers that it fails to fulfill. The book cannot really be

said to be about the labor of *the* mind, to the extent that one of La Vopa's points is that male writers like Malebranche, Shaftesbury, Hume, or even Diderot did not consider the feminine mind capable of engaging in the kind of labor necessary for abstract thought, critical judgment or the productions of genius. Nor can it be said to be about intellect and gender, broadly conceived. Instead, it is about a far more limited, male-centric topic: "the social and cultural logic of conceiving the mind as manly," "the textual representations of the manly mind," and, to a much lesser extent, "the ways in which [that logic] is subverted or at least obliquely questioned" (p. 2). Once the reader has accepted that this is La Vopa's subject, and that women's minds and voices will consequently have a very limited role to play, she will find much of interest in this incisive and erudite book. But a lingering sense of false promises remains.

If the book disappoints on one level it stimulates on many others, notably in its critical reflection on historical method. La Vopa's answer to the question of whether we can "practice an intellectual history that explores the integration of representations and social practices" is a contextualized form of close reading, in which texts are read "as the performances of rhetorical personae" (p. 15). Although La Vopa is a historian by training, his work is deeply informed by literary scholarship, and, with a few exceptions, he demonstrates a level of attentiveness to question of literary genre, style, and rhetoric that is rare among intellectual historians. Indeed, by the end of the book, we have gained a nuanced understanding of the way that male writers' preoccupation with the feminization of polite culture shaped "some of the key texts in the development of modern literary genres and prose styles" (p. 309). In a pithy formulation, La Vopa sums up his method as "a history of language at work," and it is one from which literary scholars have as much to gain as historians (p. 18).

This method bears its most evident fruits in two of the most absorbing chapters in the book, on Shaftesbury and Hume. In his chapter on Shaftesbury, La Vopa interprets the earl's published essays in light of his practice of Stoicism as described in the *Askēmata* notebooks. We see how Shaftesbury turned to Stoic *askēsis* to guard against the encroaching specter of femininity, whether that specter was raised by the gallantry of polite culture or the inner weakness of his asthmatic constitution. What is most fascinating in La Vopa's account is the way he tracks the development of Shaftesbury's essayistic style and interprets it in terms of his Stoic quest for inner manliness. Shaftesbury's efforts to develop a satisfyingly manly rhetorical persona in print, La Vopa concludes, led him to deny any place for female intelligence in the public sphere of modern print culture. His concept of style, like his Stoic sense of self, was predicated on a rigid dichotomy between male and female, between manliness and effeminacy.

In his chapter on Hume, La Vopa traces with great subtlety the emergence of a conception of intellectual labor that combines delicacy and politeness with (masculine) philosophical and critical authority. After the disappointing reception of *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1738-1740), we see Hume cultivating his skills as a polite essayist and developing a form of writing that better reflects his "conviction that philosophy must operate within custom" (p. 186). At the same time, he champions the "middle station" in an implicit rebuke to aristocratic values, thereby valorizing new forms of critical and philosophical labor (p. 180). Although La Vopa acknowledges the appeal that Hume has had for some feminist philosophers, he ultimately concludes that women are excluded from Hume's novel conception of philosophical and critical labor.

La Vopa's lucid and subtle method of reading is exemplified in these chapters. His proclaimed methodological adherence to feminism is much muddier and less convincing. In fact, over the course of the book it becomes clear he has a bone to pick with feminist criticism. Although he allies himself with feminist thinkers Joan Wallach Scott and Genevieve Lloyd early in his introduction, he has no patience for those (unnamed) feminist literary scholars who have criticized Enlightenment reason as a cover for male hegemony. This view he finds "woefully ignorant" (p. 9). His rhetoric is equally categorical when discounting Joan DeJean's classic feminist rewriting of the history of the novel in France, *Tender Geographies*.^[3] DeJean's work he judges "fatally flawed by its presentism," in large part because of her use of the term feminist to describe the activities and views of *ancien régime* writers such as Marie-

Madeleine Pioche de La Vergne, Comtesse de La Fayette, and Madeleine de Scudéry (p. 27). Such writers cannot be described as feminist, the reasoning goes, because their attachment to their elite social status made their social views decidedly undemocratic. Thus, La Vopa concludes that “[t]he notion that they aimed to democratize taste and criticism is simply wrongheaded” (p. 27). Max Weber’s distinction between classes and status groups must be called in as a necessary corrective to DeJean’s misconceptions. Strangely, however, La Vopa has no problem following other scholars in describing François Poullain de la Barre as a feminist, or in borrowing Katharine J. Hamerton’s term “*honnête* feminist” (albeit without clear attribution) to describe Lambert (p. 111). Yet as Hamerton has shown in brilliantly nuanced detail, Lambert’s particular brand of feminism was shaped, but not limited, by the elite salon society to which she belonged and the codes of *honnêteté* and politeness that reigned therein.^[4] Hamerton’s work encourages us not to fall prey to rigid dichotomies in defining feminism, whether *ancien régime* or modern conceptions of it. Indeed, it encourages us to question the narrow definition of feminism according to which La Vopa rejects DeJean’s label of feminist for *ancien régime* writers.

La Vopa is equally dismissive of feminist scholarship on Denis Diderot, and in particular on his 1772 essay “Sur les femmes.” This essay has, in his eyes, been subject to “mistreatment” at the hands of several decades of feminist scholars, who have followed Elisabeth de Fontenay in her “stunningly arbitrary absorption of an eighteenth-century text into a late twentieth-century debate within feminism” (p. 259).^[5] Once again, the charge of presentism is leveled, and it allows La Vopa to dispense with a whole body of scholarship with the wave of a hand. Yet much like essentialist claims to nature, historicism can easily become a blunt instrument used to discount certain arguments while bolstering others. A case in point is La Vopa’s treatment of Stoicism, a thread that runs throughout his book and that he attributes to figures as diverse as Shaftesbury and d’Épinay. Of the possibility that Stoic self-possession and reason might be seen as (oppressive) masculine ideals, La Vopa writes that Stoicism gave women like d’Épinay and Suzanne Necker “inner self-mastery in the face of the scattering effect of modern sociability, its threat to the dignity of rational self-possession. One might object that Stoic reason remained an instrument of domination, requiring women to measure up to a male standard. But the objection lacks historical awareness. It slights the fact that in Stoic reason some women found a refuge from the gendered expectations pressed on them” (p. 308). Yet one could just as easily say that it is La Vopa’s own phrase, “the scattering effect of modern sociability,” that lacks historical awareness, implying as it does an antithesis between the true, coherent inner self and the dangerous fragmentation that salon sociability posed to it (p. 308).

Once again, La Vopa’s rhetoric is revealing: terms like “hypersociability,” “hyper-relational,” and “hyperperformative” are used repeatedly to describe salon culture, always with distinctly negative connotations and always in opposition to an inner self that seeks to escape the dangers of salon culture (pp. 54, 80, and 307). Following on the work of Antoine Lilti, for whom the salons were and remained in the eighteenth century a fundamentally aristocratic and conservative institution, La Vopa suggests that the salons could not have been a space of social critique, because the “hypersociability” of the self as conceived in salon culture “[left] hardly any room for the introspection that distances an inner self from the particular society and culture in which it is immersed” (p. 54).^[6] Although La Vopa cites historians of the self, such as Jerrold Seigel, Jan Goldstein, and Charly Coleman, he seems here to fall prey to the illusion that the inner self somehow escapes historical and cultural grounding in a way that the social self does not. In favoring the inner self of Rousseauian introspection and Stoicist *askesis*, he seems also not to have heeded the lessons of Goodman’s feminist critique of the Rousseauian strain in salon historiography in *The Republic of Letters*. Perhaps more subtly than in the work of Robert Darnton and other historians criticized by Goodman, salon sociability nonetheless continues to appear in La Vopa’s work as a threat to (predominantly male) rational discourse and self-possession.^[7]

La Vopa’s categorical dismissal of a substantial body of feminist criticism is all the more troubling when one considers his citational practices. Aside from Scott and Lloyd, who are lauded as models of feminist scholarship, there are only a handful of female scholars mentioned by name in the main text, and the only substantive engagement is with those La Vopa discounts out of hand (DeJean and Fontenay) or criticizes

as lacking in critical distance (Carol Gilligan, p. 8). In contrast, male scholars are regularly cited in the main text as authorities and their views are never discounted. In fact, there is only one case in which La Vopa criticizes a male scholar (after initially praising him): this is the historian of science J. B. Shank, who in discerning a feminist project in Fontenelle's *Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes* "follows DeJean's lead [and] pushes his argument too far" (p. 42).^[8] This is not to say that La Vopa does not admire female scholars or read their work closely. It is simply that in distinct contrast to his treatment of male scholars, he relegates the female scholars whom he admires and relies upon most to his footnotes (with the notable exception of Scott). Of Hamerton's important article on Lambert, Malebranche, and Poullain de la Barre (three of La Vopa's major players), we read simply, without attribution in the main text: "We now have a promising new way of thinking about the significance of *New Reflections* for the history of feminism" (p. 111). What follows is a reading inspired by Hamerton's reflections and which even borrows her phrase "honnête feminist," without it ever being clear whether "this reading" is Hamerton's or La Vopa's (p. 111). Similarly, we must turn to a footnote to learn that La Vopa's methodology is modeled on that of Sabine Arnaud in *On Hysteria*, whereas Jerrold Seigel, Samuel Moyn, Pierre Bourdieu, William H. Sewell, Jr., Ernst Bloch, Darrin McMahon, Quentin Skinner, Richard Holmes, and Fritz K. Ringer, among other male scholars, are cited approvingly in the main text as methodological models.^[9] Finally, it will be clear to any reader of *Styles of Enlightenment* that La Vopa owes a great debt to Elena Russo's lucid analysis of the gender politics of taste and style in eighteenth-century France.^[10] Yet although he cites her book repeatedly in his footnotes, he never acknowledges it or engages with it in the main text.

La Vopa's treatment of Dena Goodman's *Republic of Letters* is even more vexing. Although he shares with Goodman an interest in salon sociability and the gendering of intellectual labor, and devotes part of a chapter to Suzanne Necker, who also features prominently in *The Republic of Letters*, La Vopa does not so much as refer to Goodman in discussing "the solitary labor [Necker] extolled so often in the journals" (p. 245). Yet the intellectual labor of the salon hostesses, conceived as such, is one of the central themes of Goodman's book, and it is notably an aspect of her work that has been criticized by Antoine Lilti among others. None of the controversy surrounding Goodman's treatment of the labor of female minds is addressed or even mentioned by La Vopa, who refers exclusively to Lilti in discussing the eighteenth-century salons in the main text, while limiting his mentions of Goodman to two footnotes that engage neither with her portrait of Necker nor with her broader account of the intellectual labor of salon hostesses.^[11] Such parsing of footnotes might seem petty, if it were not for the fact that Goodman's work has been treated similarly by other prominent historians, notably Jonathan Israel, of whom La Vopa has been an eloquent critic.^[12] When Israel makes the categorical claim in *Democratic Enlightenment* that the contribution of the salons to the Enlightenment was "practically zero," he does not even find it necessary to cite Goodman herself in refuting her central claim. Instead, he simply cites Antoine Lilti, thereby effectively erasing Goodman's crucial contribution to salon historiography from the historical record.^[13] The irony of this omission will not be lost on Goodman's readers, for whom it is abundantly clear that Lilti's work, for all its merits, furthers the Rousseauian strain in salon historiography skewered by Goodman. As Hamerton has rightly observed, recent salon scholarship "often goes too far in correcting D. Goodman's overemphasis on enlightened salon seriousness...depicting *salonnières* as frivolous, disempowered, or unable to engage independently on intellectual issues."^[14] Even if Goodman's account deserves to be nuanced, the feminist challenge she raised to salon historiography in 1994 has yet to be met and cannot be so easily dispensed with. Indeed, I am tempted here to echo DeJean, who observed that it was the fierce criticisms leveled against the novels of Lafayette and Scudéry that first made her realize that there must be something deeply subversive about these novels.^[15] The critical hostility to Goodman's work has taken a rather different form in the aftermath of Lilti's *Le monde des salons*, proceeding by erasure rather than critical engagement, but it nonetheless seems to point to the subversive power her work has held and continues to hold for Enlightenment scholarship. For all his claims to practice "a radical historicism," in failing to engage with Goodman's work, La Vopa has not lived up to that ideal.

NOTES

- [1] Alison Bechdel, *Dykes to Watch Out For* (Ann Arbor, MI: Firebrand Books, 1986), p. 22.
- [2] Dena Goodman, *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994).
- [3] Joan DeJean, *Tender Geographies: Women and the Origins of the Novel in France* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1991).
- [4] Katharine J. Hamerton, "A Feminist Voice in the Enlightenment Salon: Madame de Lambert on Taste, Sensibility, and the Feminine Mind," *Modern Intellectual History* 7, no. 2 (2010): 209-38.
- [5] Elisabeth de Fontenay, "Diderot gynéconome," *Diagraphe* 7 (1976): 29-50.
- [6] Antoine Lilti, *Le monde des salons: Sociabilité et mondanité à Paris au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 2005).
- [7] Robert Darnton, *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).
- [8] J. B. Shank, "Neither Natural Philosophy, Nor Science, Nor Literature: Gender, Writing, and the Pursuit of Nature in Fontenelle's *Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes habités*," in *Men, Women, and the Birthing of Modern Science*, ed. Judith P. Zinsser (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2005), pp. 86-110.
- [9] See La Vopa, *Labor of the Mind*, p. 312 n. 25; p. 8, p. 10, p. 12, p. 13, p. 15, p. 16. Sabine Arnaud, *On Hysteria: The Invention of a Medical Category Between 1670 and 1820* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).
- [10] Elena Russo, *Styles of Enlightenment: Taste, Politics, and Authorship in Eighteenth-Century France* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006).
- [11] See La Vopa, *Labor of the Mind*, p. 25; p. 330 n.36, p. 330 n.49.
- [12] Anthony J. La Vopa, "A New Intellectual History? Jonathan Israel's Enlightenment," *Historical Journal* 52, no. 3 (2009): 717-38.
- [13] Jonathan Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment: Philosophy, Revolution, and Human Rights, 1750-1790* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 5.
- [14] Hamerton, "A Feminist Voice," p. 210, n. 2.
- [15] DeJean, *Tender Geographies*, p. 14.

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