
H-France Review Vol. 19 (February 2019), No. 30

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.

Response by Anthony J. La Vopa, North Carolina State University.

Joanna Stalnaker has some quite positive comments on my book and I appreciate them. As an historian, I am especially gratified that she finds my work deeply informed by literary scholarship. That is precisely what I hoped to accomplish.

The overriding impression readers may take away from the review, however, is that the book “creates a set of expectations that it fails to fulfill” and hence that it “disappoints” and indeed leaves “a lingering sense of false promises.” For Stalnaker, the problem begins with the title. She thinks the title ought to have been *The Manly Mind*, which would have conveyed the book’s focus on the social and cultural logic of conceiving a distinctly male mind. I purposely avoided *The Manly Mind*; otherwise, some readers might have mistaken me to be saying that there really is such a thing. If the book was about “the labor of *the* mind,” Stalnaker writes, it would have given equal attention to the conceptions of the mind of female writers. I find this criticism gratuitous; there is no false advertising. If I were using the phrase “labor of the mind” to describe the intelligence I believe to be common to men and women, I should indeed have devoted far more attention to what women thought about their own minds and the mind in general. My title (and I think this is obvious from the phrase “in Enlightenment Cultures” that ends the subtitle) takes the phrase in its historical usage, where it dominated ideas about intelligence among women as well as men in the long Enlightenment. My subject was a social, cultural, and rhetorical trope in the early modern era which conceived rigorous and sustained mental labor to be an exclusively male capacity. The trope was at the center of a virtually ubiquitous normative paradigm privileging a male-centered, rationalistic concept of intelligence and its exercise in self-command and judgment. Given the dominance of the paradigm, it was difficult for women to open a new space for thinking about intelligence. My point is that among the French aristocratic and bourgeois elite, and in many other European social circles, that constraint was enforced by imperatives of status—imperatives women could not ignore without becoming social pariahs. Their intellection had to avoid even the appearance of laboring. A book primarily about men’s self-perceptions would indeed be inexcusably narrow if it ignored the binary structure of gender discourse and the capacity of women to question the binaries. As I stress at several points, women did question the binaries, though usually from within them. In revaluing the attributes the paradigm assigned them, women provided strong counterpoints to masculinist orthodoxy—and, as I note, these are quite relevant to “difference” feminism today.

As my “reasoning goes,” Stalnaker writes, seventeenth-century French female writers Comtesse de La Fayette and Madeleine de Scudéry “cannot be described as feminist...because their attachment to their elite status made their social views decidedly undemocratic.” The book’s reasoning does *not* go that way,

and I am baffled that, to judge by this comment and others, Stalnaker passes over another of my central arguments, stated and elaborated again and again. “If feminism seeks an emancipation of women,” I write, “then advocacy of the emancipation of women’s minds, however tentative from our standpoint, certainly merits, by itself, the name feminist” (p. 10). That would of course include La Fayette, Scudéry, and Madame de Lambert. But to avoid presentism, we have to maintain a distinction (a rough one, with exceptions) between early modern and modern feminism; and we must avoid reading the latter into the former. Central to modern feminism, as it emerged in the late eighteenth century, is women’s right to labor intellectually and have equal access to work requiring such labor. It was precisely that labor that was banned in the logic of elite women’s “natural” *aisance*, which was emblematic of the singular status of their social group.

I must also note another misreading within this larger one. Bent on showing that I favor male authors, Stalnaker writes that I have “no problem following other scholars in describing Francois Poullain de la Barre as a feminist.” I do have a problem following them, and the entire chapter on Poullain has been formulated to make that clear. I have to oversimplify here. In his first treatise, he was an amazingly precocious modern feminist; in his second, he retreated in compliance with early modern status norms governing elite women, even as he described their need to master Cartesian philosophy with rigorous labor. Contra Stalnaker, this view of Poullain’s feminism is revisionist.

I did choose not to deal with either the category of friendship between women or its practices, for the simple reason that that subject requires another book, despite the good work already done. It does not follow, however, that I interpret women writers “through the narrow lens of their responses to dominant male texts and paradigms.” Women *did* face the normative sway of a classical ideal of “virtue” friendship that was male-centered and indeed male-exclusive. What I find puzzling is that Stalnaker does not once mention the concept of “relational intelligence,” which countered the classical ideal by emphasizing the value of intimate intellection, affective cognition, and verbal facility, and by giving priority to quotidian particularity over abstract universals. This is a major theme of the book. From the seventeenth-century culture of *honnêteté* onward, it was developed largely by women who were revaluing female intelligence and redefining the terms of male-female friendship. I find nothing narrow about this lens. It opens windows onto the historical fact that, with rare exceptions, the discourses of female and male intelligence were in constant interaction.

It is hard to provide a specific response to Stalnaker’s description of the book as a “categorical dismissal of a substantial body of feminist criticism,” since she does not name any of the critics she has in mind. I will take her underlying complaint to be that I did not apply criticism that rejects a hegemonic male concept of reason and a “true, coherent self.” True enough: I did not choose to apply such criticism, and I find much of the literary criticism of a “logocentric” Enlightenment to be woefully ignorant of the Enlightenment’s rich body of texts. Much more helpful to me were female scholars who integrated literary and rhetorical theory with innovative historical practice, among them Elizabeth C. Goldsmith, Mathilde Bombart, Myriam Dufour-Maître, Véronique Wiel, Liselotte Steinbrügge, Katharine T. Hamerton, and Elena Russo. Most important was Susan Manning’s *Poetics of Character*, a brilliant study of rhetorical culture in the Anglophone Atlantic world that historians have largely ignored. [1]

Stalnaker faults me for devoting so little space to Lambert (four pages) and d’Epinay (twelve pages), in contrast to the much greater space allotted to several male authors. To avoid a bean-counting war, I would ask readers to distinguish between the number of pages devoted to an author and the substantive originality that results from a close reading of form and content in her text. In my reading of Lambert’s *New Reflections on Women*, I give close attention to her thinking on friendship, which occupies roughly half of the text but has been largely ignored, perhaps because it complicates her feminism in disconcerting ways. My twelve pages on d’Epinay (who was not a *salonnière*) provide a new explanation, through social and intellectual contextualization, of how, against all the odds, she became one of the first modern feminists. I do regret that I simply was not intellectually ready to do justice to the draft of her

autobiographical novel *The History of Madame de Montbrillant* (1485 pages in its modern edition!), which is immensely rich in social and cultural documentation and in self-reflection on selfhood and character. [2] Incidentally, I am now researching a study of d'Épinay centering on *Montbrillant*.

Certain distinctions are in order. I do not think that reason is intrinsically an instrument of male hegemony. I do think—and this is a theme of the entire book—that reason usually was conceived and functioned in that way under the contextual conditions of the Enlightenment. I am not positing a “coherent” self *tout court*; in my work, as in Jerrold Seigel’s, the emphasis is on the “conflictual coherence” of the self, with coherence constituted by a recurrent structure of conflicts that may never be resolved. [3] That makes me, I suppose, a very unorthodox rationalist. Do I share an eighteenth-century male belief that a hyper-social salon culture really was a threat to a (predominantly male) rational discourse and self-possession? Am I another male simply echoing Rousseau’s hostility to the salons? Again, Stalnaker conflates me with my historical subjects. Well before Rousseau, there was an undercurrent of discontent about the fragmenting (I prefer scattering) effect of hyper-sociability in *le monde* and a yearning to build an integral self in introspection and especially in solitary reading and writing. As I demonstrate, its eighteenth-century voices included Madame de Lambert, Madame d’Épinay, and Madame Necker. To show the painful inner tension between the demands of performance in politeness, including the salons, and the need for retreat into a core self, I provide a close reading of Necker’s notebooks. She did want a true, coherent self, however illusory that notion may seem now. She epitomizes conflictual coherence.

We come now to what Stalnaker considers “Joan de Jean’s classic rewriting of the history of the novel in France.” There is a difference between being “dismissive” of a work and strongly disagreeing with it. In the text—not a footnote—I do sharply dispute de Jean’s argument. I make my critique sharp to punctuate the fact that Stalnaker and some other feminist scholars give de Jean’s book a free pass. Arguably a tradition of literary scholarship needs heroic founding authors, but that does not justify yanking seventeenth-century authors into our own era. Seeming to enlist the past effectively in promoting modern feminism, *Tender Geographies* sits on a pedestal it does not merit. Accorded “classic” status, it is in fact seriously flawed. The major flaw is obvious. As a colleague in French literary studies once said to me, de Jean does not seem to be aware that her subjects lived in the old regime. She is remarkably oblivious of the structure of the French old-regime hierarchy of “honor” and how it worked, despite a large body of historical scholarship on that subject, and hence she does not understand how gender norms intertwined with status norms in early modern French feminism. The question feminists of Stalnaker’s persuasion have to ask themselves is why so little rigorous critical scrutiny has been brought to the book.

Stalnaker acknowledges that I may “admire female scholars” and “read their work closely.” For a reason not specified, however, my admiration seems to be so grudging that I cannot express it in the text. Whereas I engage several male authors in the text, I relegate women authors (with the exception of three with whom I disagree) to the footnotes. That is a bit over the top, though again I want to avoid bean-counting. The dilemma of presentation I faced will be familiar to most historians. In chapter one, in which I set up the framework for the study, it was essential to engage, and to some extent to take issue with other authors, including Georg Simmel, Pierre Bourdieu, and, yes, Joan de Jean. For the following chapters, my interpretive strategy was to recover the meaning of texts by setting them within contextual narratives of episodes in their authors’ biographies. Engaging with other scholars, female or male, in the text would have disrupted the narrative flow, and I chose not to do that.

On the issue of the role of the salons in the Enlightenment, I find preposterous Stalnaker’s claim that my treatment of Dena Goodman’s work is “similar” to Jonathan Israel’s (I have the honor of being dismissed by Israel as obtuse). It is no less misleading to align me with Antoine Lilti in his dispute with Goodman. What I derived from Lilti is how *le monde* was driven by competition for “reputation” and structured by patron-client relations. I think Lilti underestimates the intellectual importance of the salons, but how his critique of Goodman “further the Rousseauian strain in salon historiography” entirely escapes me. Goodman’s *The Republic of Letters* has surely been an important contribution, but again one misses critical scrutiny in some feminist circles. I find the book flawed on at least three counts: its reading of texts

(including Necker's notebooks) is often selectively thin; its emphasis on the intellectual labor of the *salonnières* is at the cost of failing to convey their conflicted subjectivity as mediators between the *aisance* of aristocratic polite sociability and the increasing assertion of a work ethic in letters; and its narrative of accord acceding to discord in the French Republic of Letters sometimes borders on fable. Nonetheless, Goodman's book was, of course, relevant to my effort to practice a "radical historicism" in uncovering the historical contingency of the putatively "natural" in gender differentiation, but it was not a reliable historical guide. I assumed, perhaps naively, that my position on the Liltli/Goodman dispute would be clear without being made explicit in the text. The assumption is at least partially confirmed in a review by Kelsey Rubin-Detlev, who finds that my book "bridges the gap" between the salons as "female-centered intellectual fora" (Goodman) and as "primarily...sites of elite entertainment and competition for reputation" (Liltli).^[4]

I have tried to keep these comments limited to major historiographical issues, but Stalnaker's comments on my treatment of three of my female colleagues, however trivial they may seem, cannot be overlooked. My footnote on Sabine Arnaud (p. 312, note 25) does not say that my methodology "is modelled on" her fine book, *On Hysteria*; it says that our approaches to texts are "similar."^[5] Stalnaker's not-very-subtle innuendo is that I borrow Katharine Hamerton's ideas without giving her sufficient credit. Over the last decade or so I have greatly profited from exchanges of ideas with Hamerton about Malebranche, Lambert, and related subjects. If I have not credited Hamerton sufficiently in the text, I very much regret that. I think I have. What Stalnaker ignores is that I use the text—not the footnotes—to explain why I am in only partial agreement with Hamerton. Lambert's feminism was, in part, a creative appropriation of *honnêteté*, as Hamerton skillfully shows, but I take pains to make clear that what made it radical in context was an understanding of women's intellection that, in contrast to the discourse of *honnêteté*, rejected the conventional wisdom that women's thought was naturally effortless. Though I owe a great debt to Elena Russo's *Styles of Enlightenment*, Stalnaker notes, I only cite her in the footnotes. She's right about the debt; I profited greatly from the book. A scholar has a reasonable expectation that reviewers will read her/his comments in footnotes. I refer readers to p. 313, note 2, where I write that Russo's book "is an especially important recent study of 'the modern taste' (*goût moderne*) of salon *honnêteté* and the reaction against it in the eighteenth-century French Enlightenment."

One not-so-implicit implication of Stalnaker's review is that, in giving credit, I favor men's scholarship over women's scholarship. I can't let pass a flagrant distortion of my professional ethos. In disagreeing with a work, whether by a woman or a man, I have tried to argue on the merits of the case. Readers will have to judge whether I succeeded, but Stalnaker's reduction of my disagreements to a male bias, or at least to an inability to remove male blinders, makes productive debate difficult. In judging my "methodological adherence to feminism" to be muddy, Stalnaker conflates feminism as a whole into her own brand of feminism. Her own scholarship strikes me as both original and of high quality. If this review were my only evidence, however, I would conclude that Stalnaker is not just a feminist, as I am; she is one of a small circle of academic feminists who lean to sectarianism. I hope that is not the case.

NOTES

[1] Susan Manning, *Poetics of Character. Transatlantic Encounters 1700-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

[2] Madame d'Epinau, *Les Contre-Confessions. Histoire de Madame de Montbrillant*, edited by Georges Roth (Paris: Mercure de France, 1989).

[3] Anthony J. La Vopa, "Life: Biography as Conflictual Coherence," *Modern Intellectual History* 15/1 (April 2018): 227-241.

[4] Kelsey Rubin-Detlev, "The Labor of the Mind: Intellect and Gender in Enlightenment Cultures (review)", *Modern Philology* 116/1(August 2018): E55-E57.

[5] Anthony J. La Vopa, "L'invention de l'hystérie au temps des Lumières (1670-1820); On Hysteria: The Invention of a Medical Category between 1670 and 1820 (review)," *The Journal of Modern History* 89/2(2017): 432-435.

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ISSN 1553-9172