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Changes in the Representation of Men and Women in the Second Half of the Eighteenth Century

There are diverse modes of conceptualising cultural transformations, and each of them leads us to cast events in a specific frame, thereby endowing them with meaning. Whether we think of a cluster of changes as evolution, revolution or progress influences our understanding of them, because such concepts involve different forms of causality, intentionality or teleology. As Hayden White and other theorists of historiography have shown, even the mere process of narrating events imposes order and meaning on them; the integration of happenings into a story is therefore always an ideologically charged enterprise, especially since people tend to 'emplot' history in ready-made patterns or master-narratives. As many traditional ways of describing – and therefore interpreting – major phases of British cultural history, be it according to Whig or Marxist precepts, have recently become just as suspect as formerly accepted notions like 'progress', 'enlightenment' or 'secularisation', it seems worthwhile to think anew about the different options for understanding cultural change.[1]

To arrive at more adequate concepts for describing cultural transformations it is necessary to consider the different temporalities involved. The pace of cultural transformations is difficult to measure, since it is not only discontinuous to other historical developments, but also multifaceted and heterogeneous in itself. Whereas political changes can be assessed in relatively precise categories and are therefore perceived as happening quite quickly, cultural changes usually occur over a longer period of time; quite often, their temporality is that of the *longue durée*. During the Wars of the Roses, for instance, when political power changed hands more often than anyone had thought possible before, the rhythm of political change was markedly discontinuous with the comparably moderate and slow transformations in cultural history. But even if one concentrates on cultural changes only, one still has to deal with different temporalities. Developments in the history of art and literature rarely occur simultaneously, and the history of

[1] For a thought-provoking attempt to rethink our narratives of eighteenth-century cultural history see Robert Markley, "The Rise of Nothing: Revisionist Historiography and the Narrative Structure of Eighteenth-Century Studies," *Genre* 23 (1990): 77-101. Hayden White first voiced his highly influential thesis in *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 1973).

mentalities in itself is a wide and highly incongruous field. Although the French precursors of the history of mentalities have taught us that changes in the mentality of a people take place over long periods of time, there are many exceptions to this rule. Especially when connected to revolutionary political or religious events, the pace of cultural transformations tends to speed, as well, and profound alterations can occur in a relatively short period of time.

A particularly interesting example of different temporalities in cultural transformations can be witnessed in the changes of the image of British women from the Middle Ages up to the nineteenth century. At the risk of oversimplification, this process can roughly be divided into three different temporalities: during medieval times and even throughout the Renaissance, there were only small modifications to the representation of women; the term *'longue durée'* is therefore a very apt description of what did (not) happen during that period. During the eighteenth century, a remarkable change occurred, which consisted in the rise of a different set of ideas about what constituted the 'nature' of women. Women were now thought to be rational, pious, moral and civilized; and calls for a better education of girls and a more responsible position of women within the family and society were debated in many popular magazines. An even faster transformation occurred at the end of the century, when some of the more daring beliefs concerning the nature of women changed once again. Although a number of the alleged characteristics of women that had become popular during the eighteenth century – such as their sensitivity, religiosity and morality – were retained, the British reaction to the French Revolution had a remarkable impact on the popular images of women. In the wake of the *terreur*, the beheading of the French king and the declaration of war against Great Britain, any change in the social and political hierarchy became highly suspect, and women who insisted on a good education or showed their intellectual competence were denounced as 'bluestockings'. In the new system of norms and values, the very characteristics which had supported female demands for a better education and standing in society at the end of the eighteenth century were endowed with a new meaning and now used in order to put them firmly under their husbands' control.

In the following, I will concentrate on the second phase of these transformations, which, since it took place within more or less one century, could be termed one of 'medium *durée*'. For two reasons this change cannot be pinned down to specific decades: First, the development involved many facets of the alleged characteristics of women, which did not gain ground at the same time; thus, even as far as this particular aspect of cultural change is concerned, we are confronted with the 'Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen', with different stages of cultural development happening at one and the same time. Second, the new image of women was not accepted by all British or even English people at the same time. There were rather conserva-

tive voices[2] who continued to uphold aspects of the older image of women, while various outspoken contemporaries like Mary Astell propagated the belief in some positive traits of women – for instance their intellectual equality with men – as early as the late seventeenth century. It has to be borne in mind, moreover, that the belief in the positive characteristics of the female sex was more or less confined to (Anglo-Saxon) women of the middling and upper ranks. Though it is never spelt out in the many sources which document the new belief in the 'nature' of women, this cultural transformation did not affect the image of 'others' of a different ethnic origin – like 'Oriental' women or so called 'savages' – and of the lower classes. Though the different developments discussed in this article will add up to a story which refines our understanding of the changes in the image of women in the eighteenth century, I do not claim to write 'the' story of 'the rise' of women during that period. I will rather single out one strand of a maze of interconnected tendencies which were controversially discussed by contemporaries in order to shed some light on a topic that has up to now been both underrated and oversimplified.

In my short discussion of the cultural transformation of the image of women in the eighteenth century, I will sketch – albeit very briefly and without being able to do justice to this complex subject – the most important factors which helped to bring that change about. After a short description of the new representation of women in that period (an account which will differ markedly from previous descriptions) (1), I will give a brief overview of the larger cultural context and the most important transformations within that broader field, in which the change of the representation of women was embedded (2). I will then concentrate on pertinent transformations in the history of mentalities without which the changing standing of women cannot be understood (3). Having discussed the most important presuppositions which functioned as catalysts for the specific cultural transformation, I will tackle the question of how the new views gained ground. In what ways were the new convictions propagated, and who took part in the discourses which popularised the novel image of women (4)? A short assessment of the cones-quences of the transformation in the views about the nature of women for the question of gender differences (5) will then be followed by brief concluding remarks, in which I will point to the rather rapid changes which took place in the wake of the British reaction to the French Revolution (6).

[2] The term 'conservative' in this article refers to the belief in traditional views of the nature and position of women; it does not bear any political connotations.

1.

Those who have dealt with the history of women in the eighteenth century are unanimous in their opinion that it was a period of great change and important transformations. Since the century was characterised by the development of a 'consumer culture', which separated the place of work from the home and relegated women to the private sphere, scholars have often come to the conclusion that women were of less importance than they had been before, that their status in society declined and they were looked down upon as 'mere' consumers.[3] Critics who have looked at these cultural transformations from the point of view of changes in the mentality have arrived at more or less the same conclusion. Thomas Laqueur's enormously influential study *Making Sex*,[4] which concentrates on the changing representation of (biological) sex, has argued that, during the late seventeenth and eighteenth century, women even lost their formerly held privilege that they were considered inferior, but at least similar to men. Before that time, assumptions concerning the make-up of sexual organs, which were propagated by influential clerics and scholars like Galen, held that women's bodies were akin to men's – the main difference being that their reproductive organs, which more or less mirrored those of the men, were hidden inside their body. Because of this basic biological similarity (which was tempered by a different composition of their 'humours'), the nature of men and women was – according to Laqueur – held to be roughly the same, the only difference between them being their diverging state of perfection (with women ranking behind men on the scale of metaphysical perfection). This comfortable assumption of a gradual difference between the sexes allegedly changed during the eighteenth century: from now on, a new model of radical dimorphism, of biological divergence, decreed that women's and men's bodies were radically dissimilar, and even outstanding women lost the privilege of equalling men's innate state of perfection. In spite of some criticism of Laqueur's thesis, this story of the exchange of the one-sex model by the two-sex model still prevails in many accounts of women's representations in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[5]

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[3] For a short discussion of the so called 'Golden-Age-Debate' see Amanda Vickery, "Golden Age to Separate Spheres? A Review of the Categories and Chronology of English Women's History," *The Historical Journal* 36,2 (1993): 383-414. More recent scholarship on the status of women will be discussed below.

[4] Cf. Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1990).

[5] Cf. Ina Schabert, *Englische Literaturgeschichte aus der Sicht der Geschlechterforschung* (Stuttgart: Kröner, 1997) 48-51. For criticism of Laqueur's views see, for instance, Michèle Cohen and Tim Hitchcock, "Introduction," *English Masculinities 1660-1800*, eds. Cohen and Hitchcock (London: Longman, 1999) 1-22; Susanne Scholz, *Body Narratives: Writing the Nation and Fashioning the Subject in Early Modern England* (London: Macmillan, 2000) 3f.

According to this description of the cultural transformations of the period, the gap between men and women widened, and women's standing declined. Formerly, at least outstanding women could overcome the intrinsic weakness of their bodies and attain the same status as men, whereas in the eighteenth century women were conceived to be radically different from men and therefore firmly demoted to a subordinate position.

In this article I will present a completely different interpretation of the changes that occurred in the representation of women in the course of the eighteenth century. Considering the insight that it is impossible to get a balanced understanding of the representation of women without paying due regard to the representation of men, I will argue that, contrary to Laqueur's thesis, formerly held notions about the differences between men and women were levelled during the eighteenth century. In the second half of the century, the representation of men and women became more and more similar: while, on the one hand, conservatives wanted to retain the old comfortable notion of the complementarity of the sexes, on the other hand, statements about the equality of the sexes can be found that gained currency only in the twentieth century.

Whereas women in the sixteenth and seventeenth century were regarded as 'the weaker vessel', and only a few 'manly' women could attain the standing of men, women's status changed during the course of the eighteenth century. During the former period, reason had been held to be the most important characteristic of human beings, who needed this faculty in order to govern the strong passions that could make even the righteous go astray. Since women's intellectual faculties were allegedly weaker than those of men, they were prone to give in to their passions (as could be illustrated with reference to the Genesis and the fall of Eve) and were therefore dangerous, if not controlled by their husbands. In the eighteenth century, however, a fundamental change took place. Women were now held to be delicate, sensitive, pious, tender, civilized, polite and virtuous. Sexual passions – indeed, any strong passions – were not thought to be typical of women any more.[6] Rather, women were now in most respects thought to be equal and in some respects even superior to men. Values and virtues, which

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[6] Clergymen even reinterpreted Genesis in order to insist that strong passions were not typical of women any more, for Eve's passions were "not the passions for which her daughters have been indiscriminately blamed. In reality, the resolute spirit, and persevering vigilance, with which great numbers of women preserve their honour, while so few men, in comparison, are restrained by the laws of continence, seem to me no slight proof that the former possess a degree of fortitude well worthy of praise." James Fordyce, *Sermons to Young Women* (1766; Philadelphia: Thomas Dobson, 1787) 212. For a more detailed account of the change of the image of women see my "'The slaves of our pleasures' oder 'our companions and equals': Die Konstruktion von Weiblichkeit im England des 18. Jahrhunderts aus kulturwissenschaftlicher Sicht," *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 44,3 (1996): 199-219.

were traditionally associated with 'male' character traits, in the eighteenth century, were for a short time connected with 'female' characteristics.

2.

In order to understand these transformations of the images of women, one has to take into account the larger cultural context in which these processes were embedded. As far as the daily life of women (of the middling ranks) was concerned, the most important change had its basis in the antecedents of the industrial revolution. Due to a variety of factors (technical improvement, agricultural revolution, demographic revolution, transport revolution, explosion of trade, and so on) the middling ranks were growing rapidly, and their life was becoming more and more comfortable. The work that most of their ancestors had done themselves was now performed by servants, and many things could be bought that former generations had laboriously produced at home. Spinning and weaving were relegated to people who earned their living by it, and many luxury goods became available to a growing number of families – among them carpets, furniture, table ware, but also tea, coffee, and chocolate.[7]

These changes resulted in a profound transformation of the way of life, for they led to a new domesticity. Now, the alehouse was not the only place where one could sit comfortably in reasonable warmth any more; men stayed at home for longer periods of time, friends were invited to the homes which came to indicate the heightened status of their owners and a new culture of private life emerged. At its heart was the matron whose leisure time had grown to heights former generations could only dream of. Early scholarship had it that these women were just idle consumers, and that their importance and status was negligible. But when Lawrence Stone and other scholars held that such women were "idle drones"[8], they were caricaturing rather than describing what was going on.

During the 1990s this view was corrected, as more and more scholars pointed to the importance of women in three areas: First, women were held to fulfil an important social function, for they were responsible for the

[7] See Carole Shammas, *The Pre-industrial Consumer in England and America* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990).

[8] Cf. Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500-1800* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1977) 396: "[W]ives of the middle and upper ranks of society increasingly became idle drones. They turned household management over to stewards, reduced their reproductive responsibilities by contraceptive measures, and passed their time in such occupations as novel reading, theatre going, card playing, and formal visits." Stone, whose judgements are usually quite balanced, is not the only scholar who holds these opinions; for other examples see Amanda Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter: Women's Lives in Georgian England* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1997) 2, 296.

upbringing of children during their infancy. As John Locke had argued, all human knowledge derived from ideas based on impressions which reached the brain via the nerves,[9] and the first impressions were of vital importance for the development of a child. Because of his belief in the power of associations, which allegedly made it possible to 'train' a child to become virtuous (by inducing him to connect virtuous actions with pleasing thoughts), not only the rational faculties of a child, but also the development of its character could be deeply impregnated by its first impressions. Since the mother was responsible for the well-being and education of young children, women's duty to oversee their children was perceived to be of great social and political importance. Medical advice literature therefore urged women not to give their children away to nurses, and during the course of the century more and more women followed that counsel. At the end of that period, women who did not nurse their children themselves were castigated as irresponsible mothers, and even conservative writers like James Fordyce acknowledged women's social and ultimately political importance as educators of England's future citizens.[10]

Secondly, the organisation of the household and the supervision of servants implied a greater responsibility than has hitherto been acknowledged. As hosts of conduct books stressed, women did have to act rationally, they had to be able to cast accounts and to act with foresight and circumspection in order to manage the comparatively large households. As Elizabeth Langland has pointed out, to supervise and control workers, to 'hire and fire' was quite often a more common feature of women's, than of men's daily lives, for men often worked as clerks while women had to deal with their servants daily – an experience that was much more conflict-ridden than the harmonious picture presented in novels might suggest.[11]

Thirdly, women were responsible for the status management of the family. At a time when both the financial and the economic sector still

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[9] Cf. Locke's path-breaking work *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding,* eds. Garry Fuller, Robert Stecker (1690; London, New York: Routledge, 2000) 67f. See also George S. Rousseau, "Nerves, Spirits, and Fibres: Towards Defining the Origins of Sensibility," *Studies in the Eighteenth Century III*, eds. R.F. Brissenden and J.C. Canberra Eade (Toronto, Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1976) 141-45.

[10] Cf. Fordyce, *Sermons to Young Women* 29. The debate about the nursing of children is summed up in Toni Bowers, *The Politics of Motherhood: British Writing and Culture, 1680-1760* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996) 153-95. The new social and political importance of mothers, which was later subsumed under the term 'Republican Motherhood' is discussed in Rosemarie Zagarri, "Morals, Manners, and the Republican Mother," *American Quarterly* 44,2 (1992): 192-215.

[11] Cf. Elizabeth Langland, *Nobody's Angels: Middle-Class Women and Domestic Ideology in Victorian Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1995) 41-62. Vickery shows that these tasks were also fulfilled by women of the middling ranks in the eighteenth century (*The Gentleman's Daughter* 127-160); for a discussion of the problematic relations between mistresses and servants see *The Gentleman's Daughter* 134-146.

functioned according to traditional precepts, both reputation and personal contacts were of overwhelming importance. Jobs were not to be had by proving one's skills in exams or personal ability (there was an outcry when the passing of exams was enforced for government jobs in the second half of the nineteenth century), but because someone had used his connections and paid the necessary amount of money. To secure a loan – due to a shortage of coins and paper money, a procedure that people had to go through more often than today – also depended on one's reputation, on the contacts and the social skills of the applicant. Status management, for which women were mainly responsible, therefore was important not only for the social standing of the family, but also for its economic welfare. It was a rather complex affair, which subsumed everything that was necessary for the keeping up of appearances, from rituals of social etiquette to the buying of the right clothing and furniture. The older differentiation between an economically unimportant 'private sphere', in which 'idle consumers' waited for their husbands to come home, and an active 'public sphere', in which rational men ensured the family's economic well-being, therefore has to be modified. Women were far from being passive creatures driven by emotional whims, they rather fulfilled important roles with many consequences for the economic position of the family.[12]

One might object that, as far as the change in the standing of women is concerned, these developments are quite negligible, because – apart from the task of playing a major role in the education of young citizens – these functions take place within the 'private sphere', and the reputation of women therefore depends on a new appreciation of home and hearth. Seeing eighteenth-century developments through the lens of nineteenth-century facts, the 'private sphere' is often held to be infinitely inferior to the 'public sphere', and, according to this view, women's activities within this domain are hardly valued at all. In spite of these prejudices, however, the 'private sphere' came to be highly esteemed in the eighteenth century. There are mainly two reasons which are responsible for this process: On the one hand, the realm of politics, which had been at the centre of noble aspirations – or ambition – since ancient times, lost much of its prestige during that period. On the other hand, the sphere of economics had not yet acquired the positive image it enjoys nowadays. Instead, prejudices against people who had to earn their living by any kind of work – apart from the four 'professions' in law, military, medicine and the church – were overcome only slowly, with merchants being the first to gain a higher social standing.[13]

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[12] As Vickery emphasises, authors of conduct books were conscious of the great responsibility of women: "The writers of advice literature groomed genteel women for the exercise of power." *The Gentleman's Daughter* 127. Cf. also *The Gentleman's Daughter* 161-94; Langland, *Nobody's Angels* 41-62.

[13] For a short sketch of the changes in the common assessment of civic humanism and luxury in relation to women see my "Die Feminisierung der Kultur: Kulturgeschicht-

The devaluation of the field of politics was closely connected with a loss in importance of 'civic humanism', by which man was defined as *zoon politikon*, and the value of a human being was judged in accordance with his political standing. According to this tradition, women could not take part in the activities that were most highly valued; they were rather regarded as obstacles, for they were prone to persuade men to lay aside their duty – the highest of which was sacrificing their lives for the good of their country – in order to selfishly care for their families.[14] Moreover, the basic prerequisite for political autonomy, economic independence, excluded both the lower classes and (married) women from the political arena; in addition the harsh virtues of martial valour, self-restraint, rational command of one's passions, and self-sacrifice for the common good were characteristics which in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries were looked upon as features of men of the higher classes and quite unattainable for women. Thus, the disdain for republicanism shown by some bluestockings seems to be understandable. Elizabeth Montague, for instance, wrote that she was sick of all that "Patriot din of Liberty"[15], and surmised that she was not sure whether Cato had not kicked his wife. It was thus of vital importance for the improvement of women's standing that the tradition of 'civic humanism' lost most of its attraction in eighteenth-century Britain.

As if to make up for this loss, the private sphere was more highly valued. Man returned from the political arena, and was regarded as an *animal sociale*, as "an Animal formed for and delighting in Society."[16] Now it was stressed that famous Roman politicians were most happy when they could leave the field of their glory and go home to their estates and plough their fields, and one of the most influential 'handbooks' which set forth basic tenets of civic humanism claimed that "[h]appiest of all Men, to me, seems the private Man."[17] In the more leisurely life of the eighteenth century, sacri-

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liche Bedingungen für den Wandel der Wertschätzung der Frau im England des 18. Jahrhunderts," *Archiv für Kulturgeschichte* 76 (1994): 135-163; and "Politics and Sentiment: Catharine Macaulay's Republicanism," *Republicanism and Liberalism in America and The German States, 1750-1850*, eds. Jürgen Heideking and James A. Henretta (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002) 91-111.

[14] The magisterial account of civic humanism still is John G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton UP, 1975).

[15] Elizabeth Montague, "Correspondence 312" (Henry E. Huntington Library, 6923 pieces), cited in Sylvia H. Myers, *The Bluestocking Circle: Women, Friendship, and the Life of the Mind in Eighteenth-Century England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990) 93.

[16] Henry Fielding, "An Essay on Conversation," *Miscellanies*, ed. H.K. Miller (Middletown: CT, 1972) 119.

[17] Thomas Gordon and John Trenchard, *Cato's Letters: Or Essays on Liberty, Civil and Religious, and Other Important Subjects*, 6th ed., 4vols. (1755; New York: Da Capo Press, 1971) vol. 1, v; see also Joseph Priestley, "Miscellaneous Observations relating to Education, more especially as it Respects the Conduct of the Mind," *The*

ficing one's life for the sake of the country came to seem an increasingly remote ideal, and even a 'commonwealthman' like Joseph Priestley began to praise home and hearth. Women were now no longer excluded from the sphere with the highest prestige; rather, they were at the centre of the sphere that was highly valued, as they played an important role at home and during social gatherings. Seen in this context, the many injunctions which relegated women to the private sphere did not imply a disregard of female worth. Declarations like the following quotation from the Spectator – "Female Virtues are of a Domestick turn. The Family is the proper Province for Private Women to Shine in,"[18] – could therefore work to women's advantage, for the home seemed to be the only place where people might act as morally upright, incorruptible and even happy human beings.

3.

Of vital importance for the rise of the esteem in which women were held were two intricately interwoven transformations of mentalities. One was a radical change in the conception of human nature, and, on the basis of this, the development of values which are usually subsumed under the term 'culture of sensibility'. The far-reaching changes in the conception of human nature began in the late seventeenth century and were prepared for by the writings of latitudinarian clergymen and the third Earl of Shaftesbury, who rejected the earlier negative view of man. Both earlier religious beliefs which postulated that man was still under the spell of the original sin, and the precepts of civic humanism, which emphasized that the drive for power was insatiable and that the passions of man had to be governed by superior reason, shared the conviction that the nature of man is evil. From the late seventeenth century onwards, however, one can observe a gradual turning away from the assumption of man as an evil, corrupt and egocentric being, and, concomitant to that, a growing belief in a more positive view of man, who has natural impulses to altruism, social emotions and even a 'moral sense'. Feelings were increasingly held to be not passions that had to be curbed and governed by reason, but socially valuable emotions that should be acted out. The new conception of man therefore involved a redefinition

Theological and Miscellaneous Works of Joseph Priestley, ed. John T. Rutt, 25 vols. (1778; New York: Kraus, 1817-1832) vol. 25, 71: "[T]he most valuable happiness of a man in this world is that which arises to him from domestic relations."

[18] *The Spectator* No. 81, ed. Gregory Smith, 4 vols. (1711; London: Dent; New York: Dutton, 1967) vol. 1, 255. See also Hester Chapone, *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind, Addressed to a Young Lady* (London: J. Walter, 1773) vol. 2, 5: "The principal virtues or vices of a woman must be of a private and domestic kind. Within the circle of her own family and dependants lies her sphere of action." This, however, did not mean that women heeded that advice if it did not please them. See my "'The slaves of our pleasures' oder 'our companions and equals'."

of both reason and feelings, and the new importance of the (redefined) emotions was matched by a lower estimation of reason.

Shaftesbury's ideas about the social passions that characterised the *animal sociale* were taken up during the course of the century, and benevolence as well as feelings which were conducive to the well-being of others were increasingly held to be natural features of human nature. Philosophers like David Hume and Adam Smith shared the belief in the positive functions of 'passions' such as charity, humanity, and pity, which were now thought to be characteristic of man. Delicate emotions thus came to be regarded as the most important attribute of human beings, and even the 'commonwealth-man' Lord Kames was convinced that "[m]an is distinguished from the brute creation [...] by the greater delicacy of his perceptions and feelings."[19]

During the second part of the century, as the culture of sensibility gained ground, 'delicate', 'refined' or 'tender' emotions came to be of overall importance. The earlier emphasis on the functions of nerves, which, according to Locke, acted as mediators of knowledge and virtue, was complemented by the importance assigned to the delicacy of the nerves and fibres. Handbooks for domestic medicine brought home to their readers the idea that sensitive nerves led not only to a sharp intellect, but also to refined feelings.[20] This assumption of the positive qualities of tender emotions was accompanied by a denigration of the formerly all-persuasive power of reason. Because people did not believe that a refined and civilised people like the British was characterised by strong antisocial passions like the lust for power, the role of reason was diminished: Reason was no longer necessary to govern the feelings. More than that, since the emotions allegedly natural to man tended to promote the happiness of others, even moral decisions fell more and more into the province of feelings. As David Hume had it: "Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions." [21] Reason should mainly calculate the means in order to perform actions; the impulse for the right decision was given by feelings, or, as some believed, by the 'moral sense'.

This new conception of man had ethical and ultimately political implications. Sensibility, which was defined as that acuteness of feeling that gives rise to sympathy, was cherished because it induced benevolence, and thus virtue. Sensibility – and all the 'refined' feelings that went along with it

[19] Henry Home, Lord Kames, *Elements of Criticism,* ed. René Wellek, 3 vols. (1762; New York: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1967) vol. 2, 3. For a more detailed account of the change in the perception of human nature see my "Die Entdeckung der Humanität als kulturgeschichtliches Phänomen: Veränderungen im Menschenbild und Selbstverständnis von Engländern im 18. Jahrhundert," *Deutsche Vierteljahrschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 68 (1994): 214-237.

[20] Cf. John Mullan, *Sentiment and Sociability: The Language of Feeling in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988) 205-213.

[21] David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L.A. Selby-Brigge, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1896) vol. 2, 415.

– were markers of the individual's value as a human being; not only did they distinguish man from mere animals, they also had a high moral value.[22] As a consequence, demonstrating one's sensibility and sympathy became a way to prove one's moral worth. According to the prevalent belief in the close relation between body and soul, emotions manifested themselves first of all in the 'natural', allegedly 'universal' language of the body – most of all, in those tears which flow so abundantly in sentimental literature. Exquisite emotions also found expression in 'true politeness', which, in contrast to the superficial and hypocritical manners attributed to aristocrats like Lord Chesterfield, was held to be based on sincere emotions.

The reassessment of feelings which accompanied the new conception of human nature had a profound impact on the standing of women. Sensibility was explained with reference to psychological as well as physiological factors; ultimately, the state of one's nerves was held to be responsible for the acuteness of one's perceptions and feelings. An extreme delicacy, acuteness and receptivity of nerves was regarded as a privilege of middle and upper class women, whose very bodies were held to be quite different from the blunt, muscular and strong bodies of the lower classes. This turned out to be a double-edged privilege, however, for women were therefore also held to be prone to nervous diseases, to headaches, bouts of melancholy and fainting fits. On the other hand, these nervous diseases were in great demand by the male part of society, too. Melancholy was regarded as the 'English Malady', and even men like James Boswell welcomed fleeting phases of depression and physical debility, because they interpreted these as signs of their enhanced sensibility, and thus proved their superior capacity to feel as well as their morality.[23] Thus those faculties and characteristics that were most highly valued, in the eighteenth century were mainly associated with women rather than men. After all, women were allegedly characterised by their "superior delicacy [...] modesty [...] natural softness and sensibility".[24] The profound transformations in the conception of human nature were therefore highly advantageous to women, because a combination of quite different developments resulted in the fact that it was suddenly a woman's

[22] Cf., for instance, John Dwyer, *Virtuous Discourse: Sensibility and Community in Late Eighteenth-Century Scotland* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1987) 60-63; Norman S. Fiering, "Irresistible Compassion: An Aspect of Eighteenth-Century Sympathy and Humanitarianism," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 37 (1976): 200-205.

[23] Mullan, *Sentiment and Sociability* 201-240 provides a very good overview over the relation between sentiment and 'nervous disorders'.

[24] John Gregory, "A Father's Legacy to His Daughters," *The Young Lady's Pocket Library, Or Parental Monitor* (1774; Dublin: Graisberry & Campbell, 1790) 4f. Women's "greater delicacy" is also stressed by Hannah More, "Essays on Various Subjects, Principally Designed for Young Ladies," *The Complete Works of Hannah More in Seven Volumes* (1777; New York: Harper and Brothers, 1835) vol. 6, 333.

body, rather than a man's, which was deemed to be 'naturally' closer to perfection.[25]

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This singular constellation of ideas favourable to women was not just pertinent to the beliefs of a small part of those who could read and write; on the contrary, literary scholars have increasingly come to appreciate the influence and importance of the 'culture of sensibility'; and even cultural historians often summarily refer to the latter half of the eighteenth century as 'the age of sensibility'.[26] In order to arrive at a closer understanding of the processes by which these ideas became popular, however, one has to go further and ask who was responsible for the wider distribution of these ideas. Which discourses were involved in the popularisation of the new image of man, and who took part in them?

First of all, it has to be stressed that a large number of discourses served to spread ideas that contributed to the re-conceptualisation of human nature. It has already been said that handbooks for domestic medicine prepared the ground for the re-evaluation of the delicate body, the refined nerves of which allegedly implicated a high degree of intellectual acumen, sensibility and virtue. The importance of these advice books should not be underestimated, because the arguments they put forth touched upon the 'English Malady' and therefore the English self-image, and they could also serve to rationalise and legitimate the superiority of the middling and upper ranks to the lower orders. Philosophical treatises by distinguished scholars such as David Hume and Adam Smith – and the numerous imitators and reactions they provoked – also contributed to popularise the belief in the importance of humane feelings. The same tenor can be found in numerous sermons and religious tracts, in conduct books, history books, political speeches and pamphlets advocating humanitarian reforms (for instance in favour of a better treatment of the mentally disabled and slaves, the abolition of slavery, etc.). In addition, travel literature, a host of essays in the polite (and very popular) magazines and the *belle lettres* contributed to the distribution of

[25] Thus Catharine Macaulay could provocatively parody Alexander Pope's opinion "a perfect woman's but a softer man" by emphasising "that a perfect man is a woman formed after a coarser mold." Catharine Macaulay, *Letters on Education: With Observations on Religious and Metaphysical Subjects* (1790; New York: Garland Publication 1974) 204, emphasis by Macaulay.

[26] See, for instance, G. J. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago, IL: U of Chicago P, 1992); Paul Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People: England 1727-1783,* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

those ideas that in their entirety led to a reassessment of the 'nature' of both men and women.[27]

Arguably the most important factor for the construction of gender differences was the discourse on education, which resulted not only in the re-evaluation of spheres and activities associated with women, but also in the devaluation of traditionally male domains. In the eighteenth century, classical knowledge lost its overall importance. Universities were criticised, and scholars ran the risk of being denigrated as pedants, who could neither converse nor dance or behave in a civilised way.[28] This change was not only due to the rather quaint curriculum and mores at the universities, it was also connected to a transformation in educational ideals. In contrast to former classics like Niccolo Machiavelli's *Il Principe* (1532) and Thomas Elyot's *The Boke Named the Governor* (1531) treatises no longer aimed at educating statesmen, clergymen or scholars. Instead, in accordance with the new values and the definition of man as an *animal sociale*, questions of conduct gained a wider currency. Even 'commonwealthmen' such as James Burgh wrote educational treatises which took questions of behaviour into account.[29] The question of the 'education of the heart' gained paramount importance.

While this 'education of the heart' was deemed important for both boys and girls, most advice books and educational treatises insisted on more or less decisive differences in the education of both sexes. After all, both sexes had to be prepared for different social duties, and – this is important to remember – the legal position of women did not change during the eighteenth century. A closer look reveals, however, that, as far as the question of what boys and girls were taught is concerned, the similarities tended to outweigh the differences. In order to throw some light to that complex issue, several aspects have to be taken into consideration: first, the focus on and high appreciation of the social sphere led to an approximation of the education of boys and girls. Since both sexes had to learn how to act adequately in small social circles (which in its turn could call forth benevolence and virtue),[30]

[27] For a more extensive treatment see my "Die Kultur der Empfindsamkeit: Eine mentalitätsgeschichtliche Skizze," *Eine andere Geschichte der englischen Literature: Epochen, Gattungen und Teilgebiete im Überblick*, ed. Ansgar Nünning (Trier: WVT, 1996) 107-126.

[28] See e.g. Thomas Sheridan, *British Education: Or, the Source of the Disorders of Great Britain* (Dublin: George Faulkner, 1756) 17. See also Adam Smith who praised female education because it was not encumbered by the old traditions: "There are no publick institutions for the education of women, and there is accordingly nothing useless, absurd, or fantastical in the common course of their education." Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, eds. R.H. Campbell, A.W. Skinner and W.B. Todd (1776; Oxford: Clarendon Press 1976) vol. 1, 781.

[29] Cf. James Burgh, *The Dignity of Human Nature* (1767; New York: James Oram, 1812).

[30] Why new moral standards could only be developed in the 'private sphere' is discussed

the rules of polite behaviour and the art of conversation had to be acquired by both. Even authors who mainly aimed at the education of boys – as, for instance, the Earl of Chesterfield and Henry Fielding – thus concentrated on questions of social behaviour, and, significantly, regarded modesty as very important. The art of pleasing should also be learned by boys, and men should behave in a reticent and modest way. Thus a way of behaviour that had for centuries been inculcated in girls suddenly was deemed to be important for boys, too.

But although boys were taught the social graces as well, women, because of their 'natural' characteristics, were thought to have easier access to the intricacies of polite behaviour. This was quite important, as the private sphere was allegedly conducive to both happiness and virtue, and good-breeding and politeness were among the keywords of the time. Since women were allegedly more delicate, refined and civilized, it was even claimed that only the company of women could refine and polish the blunt edges of men's nature. Even Chesterfield, who had a very low opinion of women (a fact which was brought to light when his famous *Letters to his Son* were posthumously published) acceded that men needed women in order to acquire that polished behaviour which was necessary to a high standing in society: "Women are the only refiners of the merit of men."[31] In the important area of social virtues, women were not just equal to, they were the teachers of men.

Secondly, it was controversial up to what extent the education of girls should include classical subjects like Latin, Greek and mathematics. Since public schools had not yet acquired their outstanding reputation and most people were convinced that children could easily be corrupted in the atmosphere of larger schools, a good education in the eighteenth century usually took place at home. Since the tutors who were mostly engaged for the education of boys sometimes taught their sisters as well, the separation between the education of both sexes was not as strict as it was to be in the nineteenth century, when boys were sent off to public schools, while girls stayed at home.

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in Dwyer, *Virtuous Discourse*.

[31] Philip D. Stanhope, Earl of Chesterfield, *Letters Written by the Late Right Honourable Philip D. Stanhope, Earl of Chesterfield, to his Son, Philip Stanhope,* ed. Eugenia Stanhope (1774; London: J. Nichols *et al.*, 1800) vol. 3, 167. Although Chesterfield's letters were a huge commercial success, his opinion of women was unanimously criticised. See, for instance: "[F]or women, such as have lately added to the literary lustre of the present age, are beings which Lord Chesterfield never knew; his acquaintance with that sex was all gallantry and flattery; [...] he had no idea of merit in them, and he never sought for what he did not suppose existed." *Gentleman's Magazine and Historical Chronicle* 44, ed. David Henry (London: Richard Cave, July 1774) 321. For a good account of the ambivalent reaction to Chesterfield's work see Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People* 95, 586f.

The question of what should be taught to girls depended on the belief in their intellectual capacity. As long as girls were thought to be less intelligent than boys, they might well be taken to be morally or socially superior, but they could not be taught ancient languages and subjects which in some circles still enjoyed a high prestige. During the second half of the eighteenth century, any number of magazines raised the question whether girls might be as intelligent as boys. Some writers proclaimed that 'the mind has no sex', a view that, surprisingly, prevailed in popular magazines as well.[32] Conservative authors, in contrast, (and this concerns men as well as women), held on to the view that men were more intelligent and rational than women.

More and more writers, however, claimed that the differences between men and women could be explained by their different education, and that these differences would vanish if girls were given a good education. This view, which had already been put forth by Mary Astell, gained some currency in the second half of the century, when not only women like Catharine Macaulay and Mary Wollstonecraft claimed that a better education would prove that girls were just as capable as boys. Vicesimus Knox, for instance, saw no reason at all why daughters of rich parents should not learn Latin and Greek. For him, it was just a question of being able to afford a good tutor, who, in his opinion, should also be engaged if there were no sons and only one daughter to profit from his lessons.[33] Catherine Macaulay also called for an education that would preserve what she, following the principles John Locke put forth in his treatise on *Human Understanding*, calls the natural equality of both sexes. Since, in accordance to Locke's view that the human mind is at the beginning just a 'blank sheet of paper', the senses were "the only inlets to human knowledge,"[34] there could be no innate intellectual or moral differences between both sexes. Macaulay's plan of education thus aimed at both boys and girls and combined the development of rational faculties with the culture of sensibility. She sought to cultivate reason, independence, and sympathy as necessary prerequisites for responsible moral and political behaviour. Her ideal pupil was "a careless, modest beauty, grave, manly, noble, full of strength and majesty"[35] – and it is significant that she has in mind a female

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32 Cf. Alice Browne, *The Eighteenth Century Feminist Mind* (Brighton: Harvester, 1987) esp. 102, 113, 120. See also Jean E. Hunter, "The Eighteenth-Century Englishwoman: According to The Gentleman's Magazine," *Woman in the Eighteenth Century and Other Essays*, eds. Paul Fritz and Richard Morton (Toronto: S. Stevens, 1976) esp. 80, 85.

33 Cf. Vicesimus Knox, "Liberal Education: Or, A Practical Treatise on the Methods of Acquiring Useful and Polite Learning," *The Works of Vicesimus Knox*, 7 vols. (1824; Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1970) vol. 4, 83-86.

34 Macaulay, *Letters on Education* 237, see also 163, 179, 295.

35 Macaulay, *Letters on Education* 221. It has to be borne in mind, however, that the lively discussion about the necessity of improving the education of women had little

pupil here. A closer look at the conduct books and educational treatises of the time therefore confirms the thesis that gender differences were diminished rather than enhanced during the course of the eighteenth century.

It has already been said that the new ideas which favoured women were spread by both male and female authors, although at first men had a leading role in setting the philosophical and medical terms. It is a sign of the increasing level of activity of women and of their new social standing that educated women from the middling ranks took part in many discourses and areas which were previously closed to them. In the second half of the century, more and more women played significant parts in various social spheres, and contributed to the popularisation of the new construction of gender identities: they wrote religious treatises, participated in the discourse of historiography, and contributed to the large field of educational and edificational literature. They published political pamphlets just as well as fiction and contributed to successful magazines, as for instance the *London Magazine* and the *Gentleman's Magazine* in which they held their ground as opponents to well-known male authors.[36]

Just how prominent intellectually and artistically gifted women were can be illustrated by a famous painting by Richard Samuel, *The Nine Living Muses of Great Britain* (1775), which was first exhibited in 1779. In this picture Samuel presents the muses by painting portraits of nine famous women. He could pick and choose his models from a large number of possible aspirants, and he chose Elizabeth Carter, whose translation of Epictet was much admired in the eighteenth century, the famous author Hannah More, dramatist Elizabeth Griffith, singer Elizabeth Sheridan, translator and author Charlotte Lennox (*Female Quixote*), and, of course, Angelica Kauffmann, one of the founding members of the *Royal Academy of Arts* (1769). One can also identify Catharine Macaulay, whose political pamphlets were feared, amongst others, by Edmund Burke, who thought her the ablest writer of the radical camp, and, finally, literary critic and essayist Elizabeth Montague. This painting not only proves that John Burton was right when he said that one only had to look at contemporary women in order to realise that they were just as able and intelligent as their male

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effect, since most of the schools established at the time only aimed at the lower middling ranks and did not provide a solid intellectual education for girls. For a more extensive discussion of Macaulay's *Letters on Education* see Vera Nünning, *'A Revolution in Sentiments, Manners, and Moral Opinions': Catharine Macaulay und die politische Kultur des englischen Radikalismus, 1760-1790* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 1998) 320-237.

[36] Thus, the nowadays forgotten poet and literary critic Anna Seward from Lichfield repeatedly opposed the views of Samuel Johnson. As opposed to Johnson's classicist ideas, Lichfield advertised sentimental literature and insisted on the right of educated laymen and laywomen to participate in the definition of rules for 'good' literature. Cf. John Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (London: HarperCollins, 1997) 573-612.

counterparts.[37] It also shows that women were by now accepted as contributors to discourses that were formerly the exclusive privilege of men, especially of politics and of history, which was highly esteemed as the *magistra vitae*.

5.

This belief in the intellectual abilities of women, and the recognition that some women had produced works that, in their respective fields, were accepted as being better than comparable productions by men, endangered the principle that men are superior to women, by challenging men in the very area that up to now had been their prerogative: intellectual capacity. Moreover, the claim that women's bodies were closer to perfection, which could be based on the latest medical insights, also suggested that women might, in another highly esteemed area, be at least equal, if not superior, to men. This process resulted in a new constellation of gender differences, which was very favourable to women, but rather difficult for men. After all, men had based their claims to superiority on the very characteristics which were now held to be either not very important, or innate to women as well, while women's delicacy, tenderness, refinement and politeness made them into paragons of virtue and civilization. Men who wanted to retain their claim to superiority could either acquire the faculties and traits allegedly characteristic of mankind, but typical of women, or criticise the new activities and status of women, and thus try to reinforce older values.

Particularly prominent examples of 'delicate' and 'feminine' men can be found in sentimental novels, which also served to disseminate the values of sensibility. In a host of such novels male protagonists sported characteristics which were typically associated with female behaviour. The title of Henry Mackenzie's very popular novel *The Man of Feeling* (1771) already indicates the shift in the representation of masculinity. The protagonist of this novel, Harley, is prey to his feelings, he is a creature of the culture of sensibility, delicate, refined, tender, full of charitable and benevolent impulses. Moreover, he is naive, and, above all, chaste: he does not even dare to confess his love to his exemplary neighbour in whose arms he finally dies.[38] Laurence Sterne's novel *A Sentimental Journey* (1768) features a slightly

[37] For a very good overview of the performances of intellectual women at the time see Myers, *The Bluestocking Circle*. Samuel's painting is reproduced in that volume as well. For Burton's opinion see John Burton, *Lectures on Female Education and Manners,* 2nd ed., 2 vols. (1793; Elizabethtown: S. Kollock, 1799) 96f.

[38] The femininity of the 'man of feeling' is stressed, for instance, by G.A. Starr, "Sentimental De-education," *Augustan Studies: Essays in Honour of Irvon Ehrenpreis*, eds. Douglas Lane Patey and Timothy Keegan (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1985) 253-262.

different protagonist, as there is ample reason to doubt the chastity of Yorick's feelings. But in many ways Yorick, too, boasts characteristics which are typical of the representation of women rather then men: he is delicate, led by his feelings and impulses, sensitive and easily influenced by his whims as well as his surroundings. He appears to be more led than leading; more passive than active, more emotional than rational. While Sterne's and Mackenzie's protagonists are exceptional because of the degree to which they sport 'female' characteristics, many other works – even the late novels of Henry Fielding – feature good-natured, sensitive and polite heroes as well. These novels try to incorporate some aspects of the new ideal – such as sensibility, empathy, sympathy, benevolence – into the older framework of the adventurous and active hero, who is at last rewarded by his marriage with the comparably passive heroine.

Under the new circumstances, it became difficult to uphold the new doctrine of the complementarity of the sexes. Although conservatives continued to stress that "The sexes were *providentially* formed as counterparts of one another,"[39] the belief in complementarity began to lose its credibility, as more and more men began to display characteristics that were allegedly typical of women. This could either be praised – and the character of the 'man of feeling' was at the time felt to be praiseworthy – or criticised as "unmanly Delicacy."[40] Women, on the other hand, were felt to be leaving their proper sphere of action, as John Brown noted in his famous diatribe against British mores, when he claimed that women's manners "are essentially the same with those of the Men [...]. The Sexes have now little other apparent Distinction, beyond that of Person and Dress [...]. The one Sex having advanced into *Boldness*, as the other have sunk into *Effeminacy*."[41] The complementarity of the sexes and the traditional differences between their characteristics and behaviour seemed to be in danger, a development viewed with suspicion by many conservatives. The new representations of women, the esteem they enjoyed and the levelling of gender differences was noted and commented upon by many contemporaries, both favourably and unfavourably. Thus, in 1762 a reviewer praised the classical knowledge of women in the *Critical Review*. This knowledge was held to be all the better because women did not have access to universities. He thought this was symptomatic of an overall tendency:

> [A]ll this is the natural consequence of the present system of education, as practised by the two sexes. The men *retreat*, and the women

[39] John Bennett, *Strictures on Female Education; Chiefly as It Relates to the Culture of the Heart, in four Essays* (1787; Philadelphia: W. Spotswood and P. Rice, 1793) 60.

[40] John Brown, *An Estimate of the Manners and Principles of the Times* (London: L. Davis and C. Reymers, 1757) 37.

[41] Brown, *An Estimate* 51. The debate about the alleged 'effeminacy' is sketched in Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility* 104-153.

> *advance*. The men prate and dress; the women read and write: it is no wonder, therefore, that they should get the upper hand of us.[42]

Improbable as it may seem, in the context of this review, this development is depicted rather favourably. But there were, of course, many others who castigated the new tendencies as aberrations. The conservative clergyman James Fordyce, for instance, repeated again and again that there could be no doubt whatever concerning the fact that women were made and meant to be dependent on and obedient to men – but the very fact that he has to repeat this again and again proves that many contemporaries did, in fact, begin to doubt these apparently self-evident truths. Fordyce started his battle against the new levelling of gender differences as early as 1766:

> A masculine woman must be naturally an unamiable creature. I confess myself shocked, whenever I see the sexes confounded. An effeminate fellow, that [...] copies with inverted ambition from your sex, is an object of contempt and aversion at once. On the other hand, any young woman of better rank, that [...] emulates the daring intrepid temper of man – how terrible! The transformation on either side must ever be monstrous.[43]

On the one hand even Fordyce conceded that, as he put it, 'female men' were very popular with many women. On the other hand he harped upon the fact that 'manly women' were the subject of contempt. And in this he was right, for the formerly esteemed 'manly' characteristics had lost their earlier lustre, while characteristics held to be natural to women had gained prestige. Thus men who wanted to criticise the new standing of women referred to the ancient spectre of the Amazon in order to give voice to their abhorrence of the new characteristics and activities of women.[44] Seen in a broader context, however, the very fact and persistence of the conservative emphasis on 'soft, timid' women and 'courageous' men proves that the levelling of gender identities was both recognised and taken seriously. The controversy around these issues also shows, of course, that these changes were not welcomed by everybody.

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[42] Cf. Vivien Jones, *Women in the Eighteenth Century: Constructions of Feminity* (London, New York: Routledge, 1990) 175.

[43] Fordyce, *Sermons to Young Women* 65f.

[44] Samuel Johnson tried to stem the current as early as 1753, when he thundered against "Amazons of the pen, who [...] have set masculine tyranny at defiance [...] and seem resolved to contest the usurpations of virility." *The Idler and the Adventurer*, eds. W.J. Bate, John Bullitt and L.F. Powell (New Haven, London: Yale UP, 1963) No. 115, 458.

6.

In the wake of the French Revolution, the culture of sensibility fell into disrepute. The conservative reaction to French radicalism called forth not only 'Church and King' riots but also a deep distrust of anything that smacked of levelling or criticism of any kind of hierarchy. This also concerned the writings of French revolutionaries like Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose novel *Julie: ou, la nouvelle Héloïse* (1761) had played an important role in the popularisation of the new values in England. At the end of the century, "Critics condemned sensibility as effeminate, vicious and foreign [...] and sentimental ideals as self-indulgent and anti-social, threatening to the social and domestic order."[45] Conservative voices were triumphant, and the care-taking, domestic characteristics of women were once again in the foreground, while their alleged sensitivity appeared to be slightly suspicious. Female authors like Maria Edgeworth or Mary Brunton began to downplay emotions at the same time as the romantics discovered them, sometimes emphasizing the necessary control of the passions in their very titles.[46] In the wake of the French Revolution, not only the rights of men, but – even more so – the rights of women were regarded with suspicion. Hannah More was one of the leaders of the outcry against 'the rights of woman': "It follows, according to the natural progression of human things, that the next influx [...] will illuminate the world with grave descants on the *rights of youth* – the *rights of children* – the *rights of babies*!"[47]

Because of the great importance of the culture of sensibility to the changing evaluation of gender differences, its denigration led to a rapid decline in women's standing. In the specific constellation of circumstances which I have tried to sketch above, women could and did profit from the popularisation of the new norms; they gained a higher standing and a moral authority which they put to good use in many activities, even though some of them – Hannah More among them – mainly used their new role in order to criticise the new freedom of women and to reinforce traditional ideals. The changing representation of gender differences therefore should neither be cast in the master story of a growing polarisation of the sexes which culminated in the establishment of a 'two-sex-model', nor in the story of women's loss of social and economic standing. If one takes into account

[45] Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination* 121. The consequences of the French Revolution for the position of women are also mentioned in Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale UP, 1992) 253.

[46] Compare, for instance, Mary Brunton, *Self-Control* (1810/11; London, New York: Pandora, 1986); and Mary Brunton, *Discipline* (1815; London, New York: Pandora, 1986); as well as Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*, ed. Claire Lamont (1811; London, New York, Toronto: Oxford UP, 1970).

[47] Hannah More, "Essays on Various Subjects" 75. It is ironic, of course, that More herself profited from the late eighteenth century esteem and status of women.

some important aspects of the multifaceted cultural developments of the eighteenth century one arrives at the conclusion that, instead, there was a temporary levelling of gender differences. Even if England could not be described as a 'paradise for women', as proud Englishmen complacently put it, there were many highly esteemed intellectual women and sentimental men, who blurred the boundaries between the different representations of men and women.

The great changes that occurred more or less within a century should not lead us to conclude, however, that cultural transformations can be easily dated or even assigned to specific periods. The developments I have sketched above did not begin in the second half of the eighteenth century. Rather, the premises were laid in the late seventeenth century by John Locke and latitudinarian clergymen, and later on taken up by the Earl of Shaftesbury and others. Moreover, criticism of what has been termed the 'cult of sensibility' began as early as the 1760s, and not in the 1790s. In the 1760s, however, many writers – the author of *The Man of Feeling* among them – upheld the ideals of the culture of sensibility, while vociferously castigating the exaggerated interpretation of them.[48] Therefore, there are many temporalities, many currents and cross-currents to be considered. There is no simple story of 'the rise of women' to be extricated from the maze of cultural transformations which occurred in the eighteenth century. Rather, there are different developments, many of them discontinuous, and many of them contested. To explore the interrelations and functions of such different transformations, and to arrive at a deeper understanding of cultural change is an endeavour that literary and cultural historians have just begun, and a more detailed look at the multifaceted changes in the representation of gender differences may turn out to be one of the cornerstones of this fascinating project.

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[48] This was partly due to their very popularity and the fact that they could be used to legitimate ultimately callous behaviour. Werner Wolf, "Schauerroman und Empfindsamkeit: Zur Beziehung zwischen Gothic novel und empfindsamem Roman in England," *Anglia* 107 (1989): 13; and Mullan, *Sentiment and Sociability* 128, have indicated that authors like Ann Radcliffe and Henry Mackenzie highly esteemed the values of the 'culture of sensibility' and criticised only its 'exaggerated' forms. Scholars like Barker-Benfield therefore tend to differentiate between the 'culture of sensibility', which enjoyed great popularity, and the 'cult of sensibility,' which was harshly criticized.

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