

Women and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century Britain

Review Number:

831

Publish date:

Monday, 30 November, 2009

Author:

Karen O'Brien

ISBN:

9780521774277

Date of Publication:

2009

Price:

£17.99

Pages:

318pp.

Publisher:

Cambridge University Press

Place of Publication:

Cambridge

Reviewer:

Rosalind Carr

The history of the Enlightenment can sometimes appear as a male narrative, dominated by canonical male writers, with women appearing only as subjects denied an equality of rationality and relegated to a feminine domesticity. This narrative has some validity but it is one-sided and has become increasingly outdated as historians of gender and the Enlightenment seek to re-write women into the narrative as historical agents – as participants within, rather than only as subjects of, the Enlightenment.⁽¹⁾ In doing so, old structures of clearly divided public and private spheres, with women in the latter, have ceased to be useful as means to understand and structure women's pasts. As Karen O'Brien writes in *Women and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, 'Eighteenth-century writers' sense of the boundary between the domestic and social realms was generally fluid and informal' (p. 11). In what is an important, thought-provoking and wonderfully-written study of femininity, women and British Enlightenment discourse, O'Brien includes women as active members of the Republic of Letters and examines them in the context of a reassessment of ideas of gender within male Enlightenment philosophy. O'Brien's aim is to highlight the limits of, and move beyond, the influential feminist assessment of the British Enlightenment, namely that the Whig ideology of the English Enlightenment was inherently anti-feminist. Instead, O'Brien argues, Enlightenment discourse, especially that pertaining to notions of social progress, acted to construct women as a discursive category and created a vocabulary that was deployed by female writers to what can be defined as feminist ends.

O'Brien rejects some previous feminist historiography on the Enlightenment but her analysis is a feminist one. Feminism is defined in the introduction as the late 18th-century demand 'for equal civil and political rights for women' (p. 2). However, this neat definition belies the complex feminist politics underlying the text and O'Brien's nuanced contribution to the debate concerning what equals progress for women and whether women had an Enlightenment. O'Brien does not seek to deny the anti-feminist discourse within

much Enlightenment ideology, but she also places emphasis upon those writers who presented the case for women's enhanced social and political rights, and she demonstrates how non-feminist ideas could be interpreted and employed within feminist discourses. In the end what we get is a more complicated picture of gender and the British Enlightenment, in which there is more grey than black and white.

In an analysis spanning the period from the late 17th to the early 19th centuries, O'Brien reinvestigates Enlightenment texts from John Locke to Thomas Malthus to illustrate that Enlightenment ideologies were not necessarily inhospitable to notions of women's rationality and moral agency. We learn for example how Shaftesbury's re-evaluation of domestic life meant that broader social importance could be placed on women's actions within the home, and of Sir Walter Scott's argument for the chivalric ideal as a means for women to achieve respect and cease to be the slaves of men's pleasure (an idea, O'Brien points out, that was rejected by thinkers such as John Stuart Mill and Mary Wollstonecraft).

Central to her investigation is an emphasis on the ways in which women writers from Catherine Cockburn to Hannah More engaged with and influenced Enlightenment philosophy. Rather than being placed in the periphery, in O'Brien's text female intellectuals appear as central figures in the British Enlightenment, actively engaged in intellectual exchange and influencing debate. The important place of women writers within the Enlightenment canon is demonstrated in chapters four and five where the work of Catherine Macaulay and Mary Wollstonecraft is, respectively, examined in detail. In this examination, O'Brien employs a thoroughness of research, which is present throughout the whole work, to develop a new analysis of these women's intellectual contributions. This analysis considers their work in a context in which they were uncharacteristic intellectuals but not women standing alone in a male universe. In assessing their contribution to Enlightenment discourses of history and progress and to feminist ideas regarding women's education and female rationality and moral agency, O'Brien examines Macaulay and Wollstonecraft's engagement with male and female intellectuals, and with each other.

The in-depth studies of Macaulay and Wollstonecraft in this text sit amongst a very detailed, and dense, study of Enlightenment ideologies of gender, history and progress, in which major and minor writers are examined. So in addition to well known figures such as Wollstonecraft many lesser known female writers are included. In this study, O'Brien demonstrates women's active participation in the intellectual exchange that in many respects defined the Republic of Letters. For example, women's intellectual correspondence with male Enlightenment figures, such as that between Lord Kames and Elizabeth Montagu, is examined alongside their published texts. Correspondence, like publishing, provided a means for women to participate in the Enlightenment public sphere and O'Brien's examination of female participants in the Enlightenment, making their work accessible to a broader audience, is a welcome addition to the history of women and the long 18th century and to histories of the Enlightenment more generally. However, the focus on intellectual history at the expense of the social and cultural means that O'Brien's arguments regarding the impact of the British Enlightenment upon women cannot necessarily be applied to all women.

O'Brien's examination of female writers is centred upon an analysis of the ways in which these women 'deployed and refashioned' (p. 2) Enlightenment concepts of gender, constructing a discourse that defined and defended female intellectual and moral agency, and in the longer-term enabled the development of 19th-century feminist discourse. This is a contentious argument, not all historians of gender and Enlightenment would agree that the Enlightenment's impact upon women was in the long-run positive. However, O'Brien, whilst tending towards a liberal feminist view of the importance of Enlightenment rights-based discourse to later arguments for female equality, does not seek to construct a Whiggish narrative of female emancipation. Importantly, she emphasises that the emergence of women as a discursive category within Enlightenment discourse did not result in a contemporaneous emergence of arguments for women's increased legal and political status. This is illustrated in chapter two, which focuses on Scottish Enlightenment conjectural history. In their studies of the progress of society, literati such as John Millar made women a central category of analysis – advances in women's social status, they asserted, indicated a society's progress through the stadialist (Four Stages) model, from primitiveness to commercial civilisation. In her examination of Scottish conjectural history, O'Brien recognises women's lack of agency within this framework of social progress, stating that women are 'an incidental, illustrative feature of the Scottish Enlightenment

investigation of the relationship between morality, history, economics and the law' (pp. 78–9). Highlighting the important difference between Scottish Enlightenment arguments concerning commercial society and the enhanced status of femininity, and feminist arguments regarding women's legal status, O'Brien offers as an example an interesting short illustration from the work of Francis Hutcheson. In his philosophy Hutcheson rejects natural law arguments which assert the right of the husband to command, and instead presents a concept of ideal marriage founded upon equality and reciprocity. However, in presenting these ideas, Hutcheson, O'Brien states, 'never explores the disparity between the equality which nature requires and the state of affairs in his own times' (p. 73). O'Brien argues that the impact of Scottish Enlightenment philosophy upon women was not black or white – whilst its historiography did not correspond to a discourse of female rights, it did create a vocabulary in which women were not destined to a fate determined by biology but were social agents, determined by historical circumstance; most importantly, within this discourse women had a history.

O'Brien's discussion of Scottish Enlightenment thinking is interesting and convincing. What it lacks, however, is an examination of the impact of the Enlightenment upon 18th-century Scottish women, and why there appear to have been far more public English female intellectuals than Scottish ones. That these questions are overlooked is linked to a lack of full engagement with the concept of Britain and ideas of Britishness within Enlightenment discourse. Although the exchange of ideas between England and Scotland is highlighted in the text, what makes the British Enlightenment British is not fully explored and nor are differences between England and Scotland fully dealt with. This can make the text sometimes read as English-centric, a tendency aggravated when the titles of monarchs are given only their English designation, i.e. James II, rather than James II/VII. On a less niggly level, the glossing over of differences between 18th-century England and Scotland means that the text's fascinating engagement with religion, Enlightenment and gender is weakened.

This text makes a very important contribution to the history of the Enlightenment by placing Enlightenment discourses of progress and femininity in their religious context, particularly Latitudinarian Anglicanism. O'Brien argues that the Latitudinarian English Enlightenment provided a space for women writers to assert 'the deep interconnection between private ethical conduct and the well being of church and state' (p. 36). O'Brien's discussion of the importance of Latitudinarianism centres upon its impact on the philosophy of female intellectuals including Catherine Cockburn, the bluestockings Elizabeth Carter and Catherine Talbot, and later Catherine Macaulay and Mary Wollstonecraft. By highlighting the importance of Latitudinarian theology to these women's respective works, and their impact upon it, O'Brien is able to demonstrate discursive links between female intellectuals of the late 17th century and those of the late 18th. Whilst certainly not ignoring the differences between their sometimes oppositional ideas, O'Brien shows that Latitudinarian theology united these women under the banner of religious toleration, a notion of the social importance of benevolence and a belief in female rationality and women's free will.

Whilst interesting and important to the study of gender and the English Enlightenment, in a book about Britain O'Brien's insightful discussion of Latitudinarian Anglicanism makes the lack of a detailed discussion of Scottish Presbyterianism very apparent. Presbyterianism is included but only briefly and not really in a gendered manner. Presbyterian theology played an important role in the Scottish Enlightenment, with many of the literati being clergy in the Church of Scotland. Also the religious differences between England and Scotland had a major impact upon 18th-century British politics, possibly affecting the different nature of female participation in the Scottish Enlightenment as compared to England. Certainly in order to fully understand gender and the British Enlightenment, Presbyterianism must be given more consideration.

That Britishness is not explored in O'Brien's text may be because there is already so much important material and analysis included, and to be fair ethnicity is not left unexplored. In chapter three O'Brien provides a fascinating and informed account of the impact of historical interest in women upon the ethnic consciousness emerging in Britain, discussing the ways in which constructs of women from the past, such as the Roman matron or Gothic tribeswoman, provided a means to 'anchor modern manners in an imaginatively accessible, culturally serviceable past' (pp. 111–2).

Overall, this is a book which aims for, and successfully achieves, a great deal. O'Brien has brought a wealth of information regarding the place of women within Enlightenment ideology and about British female intellectuals of the long 18th century to our attention, and offered this information within an informed and insightful analysis. It is a welcome and important addition to historiography on the British Enlightenment, and will be of particular value to historians of women and gender. O'Brien has not only offered a contribution to the debate on the impact of the Enlightenment upon women, she has helped to move it forward.

Notes

1. See for example essays in *Women, Gender and Enlightenment*, ed. Sarah Knott and Barbara Taylor (Basingstoke, 2005). [Back to \(1\)](#)

Other reviews:

muse

<http://muse.jhu.edu/login> [2]

oxford journals

<http://ehr.oxfordjournals.org/content/CXXVI/521/964.short> [3]

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/831>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/3814>

[2] http://muse.jhu.edu/login?auth=0&type=summary&url=/journals/eighteenth-century_studies/v045/45.3.mack.html

[3] <http://ehr.oxfordjournals.org/content/CXXVI/521/964.short>