

CONDORCET'S LEGACY AMONG THE PHILOSOPHES AND THE VALUE OF HIS FEMINISM FOR TODAY'S MAN

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Key Enlightenment minds are often juxtaposed with their iconic foes, religious conservatives. When discussing the subject of women's rights, however, this comparison creates a false impression that Enlightenment male thinkers held ideas very much opposed to a dogmatic institution such as the Catholic Church. Ironically, and damaging to their legacy of prejudice-free rationalism, nearly all of the *philosophes*, many of whom were "freethinking" atheists, viewed woman's intellectual nature and societal purpose through a prejudice-tainted glass, not unlike the most conservative establishments of their time. Indeed, when it came to the perception of women, the *philosophes* had less in common with a virulently secular feminist such as Nicholas de Caritat, marquis de Condorcet, than they did with modern conservative Christians who believe women should be treated more fairly, but still cling to gender stereotypes.

Voltaire doubted that women were capable of invention. Montesquieu did not support woman's enfranchisement, applauded rewarding warriors with the women of their choice, and failed to even consider woman's right to govern her person when he asserted that abortion should be utilized as a means to control population. Diderot, like so many of his contemporaries, pitied women but did not respect them, in general. The only women he respected intellectually were those who had what he viewed as the fewest feminine characteristics. After all, intelligence was to Diderot a male characteristic. As John Viscount Morley puts it, "Diderot had deep pity for women. Their physical weaknesses moved him to compassion. To these are added the burden of their maternal function, and the burden of unequal laws."¹ Despite Diderot's iconoclastic atheism, his relationship with his family was dictated by a dogmatic devotion to the prevailing mores of the day: he chose his daughter's husband and instructed her to obey him as she had obeyed her father; he saw woman as fundamentally weaker and less intellectually capable than men; and he believed the home was woman's sphere, leaving only men to operate society's political apparatus. Ironically,

¹ John Viscount Morley, *Diderot and the Encyclopedists*, vol. 1 (London: Macmillian and Co., 1923), 76.

even the great foe of organized Christianity, Thomas Paine, perceived woman in much the same way the Church does. While supporting efforts by society to save her from her natural inequality, Paine identified woman with her role as a procreator and steward of the family. Still more, the avowed atheist, Paul-Henri Thiry, baron d'Holbach, too, believed that women were by nature intellectually weaker than men, not to mention more prone to sickness; and he agreed with the Church that woman's most fundamental virtue is chastity. In fact, Diderot and Montesquieu held similar views about woman's chastity. The anti-clericism of the *philosophes* stopped when it came to replacing natural law ideas about male-female relationships with scientific principles.

Not even the supposed grandmother of feminism, Mary Wollstonecraft, makes as strong and concerted a case for feminism as Condorcet. Wollstonecraft tethers her contention that women deserve greater liberty to the point that, in order to receive such liberties, women must do their duties as not only good citizens but also good wives, mothers, and educators. Women, writes Wollstonecraft, will be rendered more useful and virtuous if they receive the protection of civil laws. The significance of the difference between these two thinkers is often lost on scholars, or at very least lost on their work: Barbara Brookes casually notes that Condorcet's work was more potent than Wollstonecraft's in realizing that nothing short of restructuring society could bequeath equality to women. J. Salwyn Schapiro rightly accords Condorcet the title of the only feminist among the *philosophes*, but, again, places Wollstonecraft's feminism in the same arena as he places Condorcet's. He writes that Condorcet's surprisingly modern feminism was "the forerunner of Mary Wollstonecraft and John Stuart Mill."² Wollstonecraft's works, however, are nowhere nearly as daring and pioneering as Condorcet's revolutionary calls for expanding equality.

While the *philosophes* mourned the unfortunate place in which women resided in society, most agreed, nonetheless, that women were naturally unequal to men. Those who rejected such a claim did little to nothing to actively and publicly support woman's enfranchisement. At best, some sought to uplift women, but none, except Condorcet, made a concerted effort to secure her participation in the political process. Meanwhile Condorcet rejected the obsession and unproven claim that women and men were fundamentally different. Instead he continuously pointed to education and socialization as having created these gender norms which were then, as they are now, perceived as universal truths. Condorcet not only rebuked the sentinels of conservatism, both the clergy and political conservatives, he also rebuked philosophers for seeking to secure the rights of man without so

² J. Salwyn Schapiro, *Condorcet and the Rise of Liberalism*, (New York: Octagon Books, Inc., 1963), 188-89.

much as pondering whether or not they should seek the same for women, also. A signature of his work, Condorcet spent little to no time exalting the past. Instead, he bemoaned that a true democratic society had never yet existed, since all previous examples excluded the participation of women. Moreover, Condorcet's ideas were not only high-minded ideals exchanged in the marketplace of philosophizing, he lived with a woman whom he treated as a perfect equal, even collaborated with, and urged his daughter to lead a life of self-sufficiency, without reliance on anyone, including a man.

FIRST STATEMENT ON POLITICAL RIGHTS

In 1787, after his marriage to Sophie in December of the preceding year, Condorcet wrote his second feminist statement, "Letters from a Freeman of New Haven to a Citizen of Virginia on the Futility of Dividing the Legislative Power among Several Bodies." The overarching purpose of the work was to identify the constitutional problems of the United States. Letter II of the work is of particular interest as it is Condorcet's first statement on the "political rights" of women. Though we usually read Condorcet's feminist works as a refutation of the least advanced thinkers of his day, ironically, works such as this one can be read as at least a wholly different antidote to the subjugation of women and possibly a sometimes direct refutation of many of Holbach's assertions about the nature of woman. Moreover, while writers such as Holbach were interested in uplifting women and revising laws to improve their state, Condorcet states his purpose as "establishing a greater equality between the sexes."³

In letter two of "Letters from a Freeman," Condorcet leaps over the business of merely stating the obvious, that women are in a terrible position, and digs far beneath the surface solution of improving the laws that govern women. In many ways, the most progressive of *philosophes* were interested in little more than improving woman's treatment. As members of an elite male group of power brokers, they showed little to no interest in allowing women to become integrally involved in the entire workings of the public sphere. Whereas thinkers such as Paine seemed to have little more in mind than to allow women the right to be exalted mothers, Condorcet did more than criticize laws that deprive them of property, right to divorce, redress against the spousal violence, and such. Condorcet agrees with Holbach, Diderot, and Paine, that unjust laws are subjugating women, but he does not see improving the laws as the first and last solution problem. For him, the reason laws mete out such unjust treatment to women is because men

³ Condorcet, "Letters from a Freeman of New Haven to a Citizen of Virginia on the Futility of Dividing the Legislative Power among Several Bodies," *Condorcet: Foundations of Social Choice and Political Theory*, trans. and ed., Iain McLean and Fiona Hewitt (Aldershot, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing Limited, 1994), 298.

dominate the political process and, therefore, make the laws. Merely revising unjust laws as so many *philosophes* had suggested was not enough. Experience proved that men do not always have women's interests in mind when they create laws, explains Condorcet. When men control the mechanism that produces the laws, they establish "oppressive laws" and, as a consequence, "a huge inequality between the sexes."⁴

With what seems like a specific aim at Jean-Jaques Rousseau, who had argued that, because woman's natural role is that of a producer of children, laws against her participation in public roles should not be amended,⁵ Condorcet criticizes laws that disallow women to be eligible for "public functions."⁶ The only people who should be excluded from public offices are "those people who had been tried and found guilty of certain crimes and those in domestic service."⁷ Moreover, "no law should exclude women from any post."⁸ In 1762, Rousseau rhetorically asks, while there may be some "towns in the world where women live licentiously and have few children, will you maintain that it is their business to have few children?" Women are naturally ordered to fulfill the role of mother and, thereby, reign over the familial sphere, explains Rousseau. Even if a woman could find time between pregnancies to participate in a public role, Rousseau states that women have no place living a paradoxical life where they are a "nursing mother today and a soldier tomorrow."⁹ Condorcet rebuts Rousseau, stating that on principle women should even be allowed to apply for a post commanding the army or presiding over a tribunal. If the idea of a woman heading-up the army seems absurd, as nearly all would have felt in the eighteenth-century, there would be no need to erect a law outlawing such an unfavorable choice. Condorcet believes that not only are women's rights at stake, but also voters' rights are at stake. As long as women are excluded from the pool of eligible candidates for a particular position, voters' "freedom is restricted" because their choices have been unjustifiably limited.¹⁰

Though his essay "On the Admission of Women to the Rights of Citizenship" is counted as his most impressive statement on women's rights, the second letter from "Letters from a Freeman" features one of Condorcet's most radical contentions of all his feminist works. Since only those who are fairly represented are legitimately responsible for paying taxes, Condorcet

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Rousseau, Rousseau, "Duties of Women," *The Portable Enlightenment Reader*, ed. Isaac Kramnick (New York: Penguin, 1995), 572-573.

⁶ Condorcet, "Letters from a Freeman," 298.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid..

⁹ Rousseau, "Duties," 572-573.

¹⁰ Condorcet, "Letters from a Freeman," 298.

maintains that “all women have the right to refuse to pay taxes levied by parliaments.”¹¹ This statement alone places Condorcet among the canon of the earliest feminists, by modern standards, and sets him apart from nearly all so-called feminists of his day. In fact, this statement defines two distinct kinds of feminism present among eighteenth century male sympathizers with women. On the one hand, some men believed woman’s intellectual prowess was near or equal to man’s but refrained from arguing that the solution to woman’s societal plight was her enfranchisement; while Condorcet demolished any notion of male intellectual superiority and argued that the only solution to woman’s unjust treatment was to ensure her right to participate in the political process. Whereas Daniel Defoe and Benito Jerónimo Feijóo were fast to remind their readers that they were in no way advocating the elevation of woman in the political process, and Paine, Holbach, and Diderot were utterly silent on the topic, Condorcet, in 1787, boldly backed at least the logic of outright rebellion.

If some opposed woman’s enfranchisement on the basis that she was politically inept and without knowledge of the public sphere, Condorcet asserts that such would cease to be the case once a fundamental change in the civil law resulted in the improvement of her education.¹² Condorcet states that the only natural differences between the sexes is that women go through pregnancy, childbirth, and breast-feeding which, he believed at the time, would prevent them from fulfilling the functions of a suitable soldier and those positions which require arduous daily labor.¹³ While one cannot defend Condorcet’s inaccurate assumption about female physical capabilities to carry out hard daily labor, what is most important is that he himself says such an opinion is irrelevant to the debate. Condorcet rejects the idea that women should be excluded from competing for any position in the public sphere. Moreover, he rejects any notion that women and men possess vastly different natures. Though his conclusion about the effects woman’s reproductive capacity has on her ability to do certain tasks is questionable, his observation that pregnancy, childbirth, and breast-feeding are the only differences between the sexes is astonishingly progressive to say the least. “I believe that all other differences between men and women are simply the result of education,”¹⁴ writes Condorcet.

In terms of woman’s intellectual prowess, Condorcet blames any shortcoming found in the female mind on society’s standards and mores. He even directly contradicts a man he otherwise respects on the subject of women’s aptitude for intellectual greatness. Voltaire, writes Condorcet,

¹¹ Ibid., 297.

¹² Ibid., 298-299.

¹³ Ibid., 299.

¹⁴ Ibid.

“granted them every talent except invention.” Condorcet doubts this opinion. One can hardly know woman’s potential because she has been deprived of the kind of education that would cultivate genius.¹⁵ “Besides, the restrictions placed upon the soul and minds of women by custom and opinion, almost from infancy and especially from the time when genius begins to develop, are bound to affect its progress in almost all areas.”¹⁶ Not only does Condorcet believe women are capable of achieving greatness of intellect, he also believes many women have already exhibited such mental prowess, though in different intellectual arenas. In fact, while Holbach echoes many of his contemporaries in ridiculing woman’s “imagination,” Condorcet cites such as a tool used by women to produce great works. Condorcet pointed to women authors such as Marie-Madeleine de La Fayette and Marie de Rabutin-Chantal, marquise de Sévigné and their keen passion and sensibility as proof of genius as it related to the production of a dramatic work. Not only does Condorcet hold passion and sensibility in high regard,¹⁷ he even suggests that genius necessitates imagination and sensibility.¹⁸

PERSONAL LIFE AS PROOF OF FEMINISM

Condorcet’s feminism penetrated beyond his politics down to the core of his person. Brookes writes that “The all-embracing nature of his mother’s love may well have been responsible for his ‘craving for intimacy’ which characterized the relationships of the mature Condorcet and for his sympathy with the plight of the female sex.”¹⁹ Beyond such speculation, Condorcet’s marriage to Sophie was indeed an expression of his feminism and maybe even a key ingredient to the development of an even more daring feminist mindset.

Condorcet’s personal relationship with his wife is perhaps the best proof of the revolutionary nature of his feminism. He met the politically astute twenty-two-year-old,²⁰ Marie-Louise-Sophie de Grouchy, in the mid 1780s.²¹ By December 28, 1786, the two were married.²² Interestingly, the very fact that he had married at all says something about Condorcet’s passionate mindset. Hitherto, the *philosophes* generally held the idea of marriage in contempt, believing it more becoming of a philosopher to live

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Barbara Brookes, “The feminism of Condorcet and Sophie de Grouchy,” *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 189 (1980), 329.

¹⁸ Ibid., n.105.

¹⁹ Brookes, “Condorcet and Sophie de Grouchy,” 302.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 323.

²² Ibid., 325.

exclusively wedded to his work.²³ As a result most of these thinkers, with few exceptions, did not marry. They did, however, condone the taking of a mistress if deemed necessary; and most of them did so. Condorcet was a special exception to this general tendency. Not only did he marry, Condorcet found in his spouse an intellectual partner who probably had a tremendous impact on his intellectual and political thought.²⁴ Juxtaposing Condorcet's marital life with the relationships of the other *philosophes*, Schapiro writes that Condorcet "was a man of austere morals, and his relations with women were dictated by a sense of honor that was puritanical rather than chivalrous." Whereas most of the *philosophes* were known to have had mistresses, a common practice in France at the time, from what it is known Condorcet was the rare exception. At a time when women were objectified and appreciated as little more than beautiful distractions, Condorcet was uniquely devoted to his wife.²⁵ Similarly, Sophie loved her husband to the fullest at a time when women most certainly loathed the behavior, if not the person of their husbands. We find a glimpse of Sophie's unconquerable love in a letter she wrote to her husband during the Reign of Terror. With her husband deemed an enemy of the government, Sophie had no choice but to divorce Condorcet in order to be spared persecution.²⁶ "This apparent separation, while my attachment to you and the links which bind us are unbreakable, is the height of my misfortune," writes Sophie as her husband hides from executioners. "I dare to believe that you know my heart well enough to feel that our mutual attachment is the bond uniting your life to mine. I cannot express how much this sacrifice is costing me. . . . It will leave a bitterness in my heart which only the justice of yours can soften."²⁷

Though it is difficult to know with certainty how responsible Sophie was for increasing Condorcet's dedication to feminism, it is worth noting that in his work, "On the Influence of the American Revolution on Europe," written just one year before his marriage, Condorcet regrets the continuation of "Negro slavery" in the United States, but does not mention women.²⁸ In the year following his marriage Condorcet authors a powerful statement for gender equality found in the second letter of "Letters from a Freeman of New

²³ Ibid., 303.

²⁴ "Condorcet was in constant intellectual communion with his wife, who stimulated his thoughts and who aided him in his writings. In Sophie he beheld the realization of the potential abilities of woman." Schapiro, *Rise of Liberalism*, 189.

²⁵ Schapiro, *Rise of Liberalism*, 188-89.

²⁶ Iain McLean and Fiona Hewitt, ed., *Condorcet: Foundations of Social Choice and Political Theory* (Aldershot, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing Limited, 1994), 30.

²⁷ Condorcet quoted in McLean, *Condorcet*, 30.

²⁸ Condorcet, "On the Influence of the American Revolution on Europe," in *Condorcet Selected Writings* (Indianapolis, Indiana: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1976), 76.

Haven.” While one must acknowledge that Condorcet’s feminism had first shown itself earlier, in “Note J” written sometime between 1782 and 1785, the 1787 work uniquely calls for woman’s enfranchisement. Moreover, as has been argued, this letter also has the unique feature of arguing that women would be justified in refusing to pay taxes until they are truly represented in government. Schapiro writes: “Condorcet was in constant intellectual communion with his wife, who stimulated his thoughts and who aided him in his writings. In Sophie he beheld the realization of the potential abilities of woman.”²⁹ If not *the* main cause, Sophie, as a staunch supporter of democratic liberalism and a mind greatly respected by her husband, was at least an important ingredient in the fomentation of such ideas. Indeed we do know that the couple’s marriage of the minds endured even Condorcet’s death. Sophie was responsible for helping to produce the first collection of his works.³⁰ Maintaining the Condorcet’s defiant legacy, in 1799 it is said that Napoleon told Sophie, “I do not like women who meddle in politics.” She purportedly replied, “All the same, in a country where they may have their heads cut off it is quite natural that they should wish to know why.”³¹ Her will, written in 1820, had only nine clauses including a request “to be buried like the poor” as well as the naming of a literary executor tasked to create another edition of her husband’s complete works.³²

Whereas Diderot’s 1772 letter to his daughter Angelique is perhaps the most damning evidence against his purported feminism, Condorcet’s seemingly innocuous 1794 letter to his daughter Eliza is arguably the most significant manifestation of his feminism. In Diderot’s letter we learn that Angelique had not even become two years old before her father had chosen her future spouse.³³ Rather than plan his daughter’s marriage, Condorcet composed a letter offering sage advice to his young child, only four years old at the time, on how best to live without worry for the constraints of codependence. In these two letters we find an incredible juxtaposition, proving just how radically advanced Condorcet’s feminism is in comparison to his fellow *philosophes*.

As mentioned before, Diderot’s letter focuses on reminding his daughter that her happiness is bound up in the happiness of her new husband. Condorcet’s letter, by contrast, is principally concerned with urging Eliza to realize that happiness comes through self-sufficiency. Condorcet begins by stressing to her the importance of learning a skill so that she will be financially independent. He also urges her to realize that wealth does not

²⁹ Schapiro, *Rise of Liberalism*, 189.

³⁰ McLean, *Condorcet*, 31.

³¹ Sophie quoted in McLean, *Condorcet*, 85, n. 19.

³² McLean, *Condorcet*, 31.

³³ McLaughlin, “Diderot,” 303.

guarantee happiness and, as a matter of fact, can be the cause of much discontent in those who “fear of losing it.”³⁴ A poor, independent person, according to Condorcet, is better off than a rich person who depends on others. “Work will provide for your needs; and though you may become poor, you will never become dependent on others.”³⁵ The renunciation of unnecessary bondage is one of the main themes of Condorcet’s letter. Beyond seeking to free his daughter of being bound up in the opinions and companionship of other, and the unrequited desire for greater wealth, Condorcet urges his daughter to look inward for joy: “Enjoy the feelings of the people you love; but above all, enjoy your own.”³⁶

In Diderot’s letter one cannot help but notice that he makes more than a few references to what is expected of the female sex. Condorcet’s letter, however, offers nongendered advice that could have just as easily been given to a son. He makes no remark of woman’s “place” or role in society, whereas Diderot specifically notes that women should be occupied with “interior” affairs while men are to be concerned with “exterior affairs.”³⁷ Condorcet speaks only of what he believes lessens and increases the happiness of all men, that is men and women. Significantly, Condorcet mentions nothing to his daughter about marriage. Instead of urging her to take up a domesticated life in servitude to a husband, Condorcet warns against relying on others to alleviate boredom. While the company of others may succeed in occupying “empty moments,” one is nevertheless “subject to their tastes and desires,” quickly lessening the luster of such company.³⁸ One’s happiness, Condorcet assures his daughter, is achieved by being capable of independently “filling your empty time, staving off boredom.”³⁹ Diderot advises his daughter that women wishing to alleviate themselves of boredom need look no further than “domestic occupations” which “[f]ortify your soul.”⁴⁰ Condorcet’s remedy for boredom is the acquisition and application of “some skill in the arts and crafts or in exercising your mind.”⁴¹ Here we have one of the most telling comparisons of all: Diderot advises his daughter to busy herself with housework while Condorcet urges his daughter to enrich her life with some skill or, better yet, to exercise her mind. Diderot seems to forget his daughter has a mind to exercise. Condorcet not only

³⁴ Condorcet, “Condorcet’s Advice to his Daughter,” in *Foundations of Social Choice and Political Theory*, trans. and ed., Iain McLean and Fiona Hewitt (Hants, England: Edward Elgar Publishing Company, 1994.), 284.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., 286.

³⁷ Diderot quoted in McLaughlin, “Diderot,” 304.

³⁸ Condorcet, “Advice,” 284.

³⁹ Ibid., 285.

⁴⁰ Diderot quoted in McLaughlin, “Diderot,” 303-304.

⁴¹ Condorcet, “Advice,” 285.

wishes that his daughter stay busy to avoid boredom but he also sees such an activity as the gateway to her autonomy:

. . . do not forget that your aim must be the daily pleasure of being busy, of doing something which ensures your independence, protects you from boredom, and prevents the vague distaste for existence and unexplained depression which affect otherwise peaceful and successful lives.⁴²

Finally, while Diderot's advice centers on his view that women are prone to boredom, Condorcet's advice implies that boredom and depression plague both sexes.

Condorcet offers no moralizing on the subject of "the pleasures and perils of vanity." While Diderot urges his daughter to invest in her appearance of virtue, Condorcet urges his daughter to avoid being caught in the frivolity of vanity. He urges restraint so that vanity "does not dominate you, that its pleasures do not become your reward, nor the pain it causes prevent you from making an effort."⁴³ His advice is astonishingly gender-neutral, particularly when we consider how most of his contemporaries assume women are most moved by "passions" and pleasures.

Whereas Diderot's works attest to his view that women are vastly incapable of sound reasoning, Condorcet exalts his wife's rationality. He tells his daughter of her mother's "tenderness and superior reason" which will enable certain skills "in the arts and crafts or in exercising your mind."⁴⁴ In fact, there is much debate over how influential Sophie was on shaping Condorcet's political ideas toward the last years of his life. The unanimous consensus is that Condorcet appreciated and benefited from a relationship with a keenly intelligent and informed woman. She may have even co-written certain works with Condorcet.

Condorcet also makes the assumption that his daughter will have something to contribute to society. He urges his daughter to be benevolent, experience the pleasure of helping others in need by not only giving money but more importantly by giving time and "attention and enlightenment."⁴⁵ "Your benevolence will then be independent of your fortune and not limited by it; it will become an occupation and a source of pleasure."⁴⁶

Condorcet's acute sensitivity is one possible cause of his advocacy of women's rights. In the letter he attributes "gentle sensitivity" or

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 286.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

“humanity” to “the natural feeling which makes us share the sorrow of all sentient beings.” He goes on to write that this sensitivity, “which can be a source of happiness,” should not be limited to human relationships but should also be extended “even to animals.”⁴⁷ We should be sensitive to the happiness and pain of anything that belongs to us.⁴⁸ Later he writes that one’s self-respect is anchored in one’s treatment of others. To ensure that we do not treat another dishonorably, we must look to the golden rule, the ancient principle of empathy: “Think of the pain you have felt as a result of even minor injustices or mistakes, and imagine how it must feel to be the victim of serious injustices or truly shameful misconduct.”⁴⁹

Immediately one can not help but to recognize the respect Condorcet has for his reader. He holds nothing back, ignores propriety and tradition, and speaks to his daughter as his equal. He does not even take time out to lecture his daughter about the feminine virtue of chastity. Instead, he spends his ink urging his daughter to cultivate self-control, independence, a serious work ethic, and inner happiness. The fundamental difference between Condorcet’s letter and Diderot’s letter is that Condorcet is principally concerned with advising his daughter on the route to happiness. The map, he explains, begins with self-sufficiency. To be happy one must be intellectually and financially independent. One must also cultivate self-respect, which is partly born out of the equitable treatment of one’s fellow human beings. Diderot’s letter, conversely, concentrates on mapping out the proprieties of a conventional woman’s life during the eighteenth century. Condorcet wants happiness for his daughter; Diderot wants good behavior and the preservation of societal norms.

WHY DID HE BECOME A FEMINIST?

Though space does not permit a complete explanation for the findings, it is necessary to briefly answer one of the most important questions left: what prompted Condorcet to pursue feminism? Clearly he did not choose the feminist course in an effort to gain popularity. In 1797 Condorcet noted that his contention that women deserved expanded liberties would probably put him out of favor with women. “I have discussed their right to equality and not their influence, and so might be suspected of secretly wishing to decrease this influence,” he wrote. “And since Rousseau gained their support by saying that they were made simply to look after us and were fit only to torment us, I should not expect their support.”⁵⁰ If his peers largely agreed that women are not equal to men; if it is a near universal norm that

⁴⁷ Ibid., 287.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Condorcet, “Letters from a Freeman,” 299.

men and women are believed to be innately unequal and formed for different spheres; if even women, themselves, view talk of equality with suspicion, why did Condorcet make the unpopular stand for their political liberty? Cold reason is generally seen as his principle motivator. Indeed, there is evidence to support the idea that his rationalism is an important if not key contributor to his blossoming feminism. Upon realizing that claims of woman's inferiority to man were based upon prejudices, Condorcet coldly concluded that such unfounded notions could not be allowed immunity from the facts. The complete impetus, however, is comprised of a complicated mix of influences. In short, Condorcet became a feminist for a combination of reasons that cannot be separated from one another: First, Condorcet believed that the objective truth that women and men are intellectual equals, which he found proof of in his personal relations with women, and the principle of individual human freedom should triumph over the triple terror of archaic (authority-based) tradition, prejudice, and utility. Second, while utility was not grounds for trumping woman's political rights, Condorcet's feminism may have also been influenced by his belief that woman's enfranchisement will further the progress of human society. Finally, though often discounted as a contributing factor, one of the key factors to Condorcet's feminist stance was his passion for justice, which prompted him to put his ideas and knowledge of gender equality into concrete action aimed at altering the composition of society.

In his most famous work, *The Progress of the Human Mind*, Condorcet wrote that "the true rights of man and how they can all be deduced from the single truth, that *man is a sentient being, capable of reasoning and of acquiring moral ideas.*"⁵¹ Since his experience had shown him women were, in fact, sentient beings, not unlike men, Condorcet, informed by Cartesian rationalism, asserts that the only logical conclusion is that women, like men, deserved the benefits of natural rights. Unflinching in the face of tradition and assumed truths, Cartesian rationalism equips Condorcet's intellect with a prejudice slaughtering skill few of his contemporaries come close to owning. Condorcet also believed that the *truth* of woman's equality and the subsequent entitlement of equal political liberties took precedence over a refusal of those rights based on the argument of *utility*. Condorcet refused arguments against woman's enfranchisement on the basis of the possibly detrimental consequences of such action. He argues that "reason of utility" cannot trump a "true right."⁵² Arguments grounded in utility, he tells

⁵¹ Condorcet, *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind*, trans. June Barraclough (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1955), 128.

⁵² Condorcet, "On the Admission of Women to the Rights of Citizenship," in *Condorcet Selected Writings*, ed. by Keith Michael Baker (Indianapolis, Indiana: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1976), 101.

us, have often become sewers in which the grossest violations of human rights have occurred. Utility has often “served as the pretext and excuse of tyrants.”

It is in the name of utility that commerce and industry groan in chains and that the African remains afflicted with slavery; it was in the name of public utility that the Bastille was filled to overflowing, that the censorship of the press was instituted, that accused persons were denied a public trial and subjected to torture.⁵³

Despite Condorcet’s stance that utility cannot be used to extinguish a right, the advantages of enfranchisement, ironically, may have played an important part in his appreciation and espousal of feminist ideas. On the one hand, scholars note that Condorcet is able to become a feminist because he disregards the strain of thought which considered the consequences of expanding woman’s liberty. For Condorcet, all that mattered was that woman is man’s equal; thus she should be treated as such. This line of thinking adds more force to the idea that Cartesian rationalism is the principle impetus behind Condorcet’s feminism. Indeed, Niklaus contends that Condorcet realizes the specious nature of utility-based reasoning used by men such as Charles Maurice de Talleyrand; and that Condorcet refuses to place the supposed interest of the state over the rights of man.⁵⁴ True, Condorcet dismissed utilitarian arguments against women’s enfranchisement as a poor foundation upon which to ground political action; it is quite important to note that he did *not*, however, acknowledge the *validity* of the utilitarian claims. Indeed, he lacerated as inaccurate utilitarian predictions of how women’s rights will impact society: women will leave the home; the family unit will dissolve; the proverbial sky will fall. Condorcet, although reluctantly, pointed out that woman’s enfranchisement will actually *aid* not harm societal progress. Both men and women will benefit from greater sexual equality. Condorcet believed that even men are harmed by laws bolstering gender inequality: “Among the causes of the progress of the human mind that are of the utmost importance to the general happiness, we must number the complete annihilation of the prejudices that have brought about an inequality of rights between the sexes, an inequality fatal even to the party in whose favour it works.”⁵⁵ Condorcet particularly believed that more equitable laws and societal behavior among the sexes would result in better personal

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Robert Niklaus, “Condorcet’s Feminism: A Reappraisal,” *Condorcet Studies* II, ed. David Williams (1987), 131.

⁵⁵ Condorcet, *Progress of the Human Mind*, 193.

relationships not only among mothers and sons, sisters and brothers, but also husbands and wives. Demolishing inequality would even lay the ground for increasing “the happiness of family life,” writes Condorcet.⁵⁶

Finally, while many scholars have concentrated on Condorcet’s dispassionate, intellectual motives for supporting women’s rights, a key ingredient has been ignored. Other male thinkers such as Feijóo, whose notion of gender equality was based on cold reason, not only failed to act but essentially dismissed the notion of restructuring certain elements of society in light of the fact of gender equality. Why did Condorcet act when others merely theorized and, in practice, ignored the situation? In seeking to find an answer to this important question one finds a strong body of evidence to conclude that passion, empathy, and emotion were the elements that fueled the codification of Condorcet’s notion of equality into a burning cause of justice—feminism.

In the final paragraph on the subject of women’s rights, found in letter two of Condorcet’s “Letters from a Freeman of New Haven,” Condorcet apologizes to his readers for what may seem like a “very long” examination; but, he points out, “we are discussing the rights of half of the human race which have been neglected by all legislators.” One sentence later he makes a powerful and crucial comment, which makes clear that Condorcet was not only a cold engine of reason, but also a warm vessel for passionate justice: “Even a philosopher finds it hard not to get a little carried away when discussing women.”⁵⁷ While his earlier argument for women’s equality is thoroughly rational, here Condorcet has admitted that emotion plays at least a partial role in his decision to not only leave his original subject, but also to discuss women’s rights at length.

For all the attention given to Condorcet’s cold reason, one must realize how greatly his reason was impacted by his emotional sensitivity. Consider his belief that empathy, in addition to reason, must play a key role in the evolution of human morality:

When I left college, I fell to reflecting on the moral ideas of justice and virtue. I felt that I saw that the interest we have in being just and virtuous arose from the pain one sensitive being must needs feel on becoming aware of the pain suffered by another. Since then . . . I have tried to preserve this sentiment in all its natural energy. I gave up hunting which I had enjoyed, and would not even kill an insect unless it was very harmful.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Condorcet, “Letters from a Freeman,” 299.

⁵⁸ Condorcet quoted in Mclean, *Condorcet*, 7.

While reason may have established the truth of woman's equality to man, Condorcet was moved to take action and speak out with an unpopular opinion because he was emotionally connected to the suffering of his fellow humans. His empathy, his identification of his life with the lives of those around him, which was indeed informed by reason, created in Condorcet a zeal for justice that erodes the scholarly inaction which marred the epiphanies of earlier male thinkers.

There is still more evidence that Condorcet valued the role of sensitivity in the human experience. Whereas some of the Encyclopedists belittled woman's imagination and sensibility, Condorcet pointed to women authors such as mme de La Fayette and mme de Sévigné and their keen passion and sensibility as proof of genius as it related to the production of a dramatic work. Not only did Condorcet hold so-called "female" attributes of passion and sensibility in "high regard,"⁵⁹ "he had earlier suggested that such traits as imagination and sensibility were necessary for genius."⁶⁰ To Condorcet, these traits were not, however, "female" traits, after all. Women are no more inherently compassionate or family minded than men. Similarly, women are in fact equally capable of so-called "male" reasoning abilities. Here one can infer that Condorcet believed that reason, imagination, and sensibility are all necessary ingredients in forming a well-rounded human mind. Indeed, we know that Condorcet was known for his strong emotions. When he was in love with mme de Meulan, Condorcet had explained to m. Suard that "if she had ordered him to kill the first passer-by he could not have disobeyed her."⁶¹ We may concede that cold reasoning is the mother of Condorcet's realization of gender equality; however, passion is the mother of his impetus to move, to become an activist on behalf of women's rights:

Yet under the timid exterior Condorcet presented in public, there lay a passionate nature, a character that Julie de Lespinasse divined so well in naming Condorcet the "snow-capped volcano." This consuming passion was evident in the unreciprocated love that Condorcet expressed for mme Meulan. His inability to contain his feelings or to deal with them rationally has been described as an affliction of "sensibilité," a characteristic more commonly ascribed to women of the period than to men. It was this avidity in matters of love and later in politics that served to distinguish Condorcet from many of his contemporaries.⁶²

⁵⁹ Brookes, "Condorcet and Sophie de Grouchy," 329.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 329, n. 105.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 326, quoting Baker, Condorcet, pp. 403-404 n. 92

⁶² *Ibid.*, 305-306.

CONCLUSION

For all of their exhortations of reason, empiricism, and free-thinking, nearly all elite male thinkers of the Enlightenment failed to escape the Promethean bondage that left them chained to the irrational boulder of sexism, a monument to hypocrisy as well as, ironically, one of the greatest prejudices of the time. Condorcet's ability to recognize any and all prejudices made him the Hercules among the *philosophes* who frees the Enlightenment from its imprisonment by hypocrisy, slaughtering the prejudice that stood pecking at the very cornerstone of the Age of Reason's principles. In this way he became not only the first true male feminist of his time, but also the first *philosophe* to make good on the principle to fell every unsubstantiated prejudice. For men and women in the twenty-first century, Condorcet is a monument to the possibilities of life freed of the bondage of stereotypes and prejudices. He reminds us that feminism does not belong to any one gender any more than human rights belong to any one gender; and he is a beacon, calling upon all human beings to embrace the totality of the human experience and to combat injustice and prejudice with the twin swords of reason-inspired truth, and empathy-driven passion.

In Condorcet we find the gray between the typological analyses of the eighteenth century. When all is said, Condorcet stood in the center of a bridge linking the age of passion and the age of reason, a bridge that also towered over apathetic concepts of gender that left men and women stranded on separate islands, often to their own detriment. On this bridge, Condorcet realized a feminism none of his male counterparts had recognized; there he permitted himself to experience and embrace a full range of human qualities, those associated with men and those associated with women, including rationalism and passion. In this way Condorcet is for men the key to unlocking the twin steeds of both reason, and passion and sensitivity. He stands out as irrefutable proof that a man can love as ardently as he can think rationally; that a man can feel and care as much as any woman, if only he allows himself to be freed of gender stereotypes, of the cultural pressures and prejudice that plague both sexes. Condorcet reminds us time and time again that education, not sex, is the fundamental difference between men and women. Today, this remains true. While women and men receive much of the same schooling, their cultural education, via media and marketing, is vastly different.

Most men and women still allow themselves to be largely defined by their sex: women are sensitive and like the color pink, shopping, fashion, and romantic comedies. Men are emotionally indifferent and like blue, sports, and action flicks. While evidence of the fallacious nature of these assumptions abounds—one thinks of the large number of women who like sports such as football, or the quickly increasing rate of men utilizing beauty

products and plastic surgery—the axiomatic thinking that men are from Mars and women are from Venus prevails today.

From an early age our children are issued scripts dictating their behavior according to their genitalia. Common opinion holds that aggressive tendencies among boys and calm, reserved behavior among girls are innate to each sex. Children and adults are bludgeoned into believing they are and/or should be what they see in advertising campaigns which, in our commercialistic society, pervade every turn of their lives, from the grocery store and the mall, daycare and work, to the radio and television. Rousseau, however, is a good model to show that assumptions about one's character, when based on sex, however, are historically baseless.

Rousseau believed little girls were ill-suited for real intellectual endeavors because they “dislike learning to read and write.” They were, however, noted Rousseau, “always ready to learn to sew.”⁶³ (Today, this gender stereotype is often reversed to conclude that women are more predisposed to quiet, contemplative arts.) Moreover, countless men, including many intellectuals, during the eighteenth century believed it a simple truth that women were incapable of invention or genius. Such men even thought women incapable of functioning in the public or political sphere of society. While people have quickly forgotten old prejudices, writing them off as absurd, they now defend new prejudices with a vigor that blindly accepts untested tradition as if it is fact.

More than two hundred years after Condorcet asserted that the principle differences between men and women are the result of education, the Vatican, and other modern bastions of conservatism, are still decrying efforts to free men and women of gender stereotypes and thus expand their individual liberties. Feminism, in a word, is their enemy. On July 31, 2004, the Vatican issued a letter accusing feminism of causing adversarial relations among men and women. In section one, titled “The Question,” the Vatican explained how the approach utilized to free women of a subordinate situation in society has resulted in a tendency “to emphasize strongly conditions of subordination in order to give rise to antagonism: women, in order to be themselves, must make themselves the adversaries of men.” The consequence of such is the general breakdown in the family unit: “This process leads to opposition between men and women, in which the identity and role of one are emphasized to the disadvantage of the other, leading to harmful confusion regarding the human person, which has its most immediate and lethal effects in the structure of the family.” Finally, the letter maligns attempts to deny the differences between the sexes: “In order to avoid the domination of one sex or the other, their differences tend to be denied, viewed as mere effects of historical and cultural conditioning.” The

⁶³ Rousseau, “Duties,” 578.

author of the letter, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, goes on to claim, “In this perspective, physical difference, termed *sex*, is minimized, while the purely cultural element, termed *gender*, is emphasized to the maximum and held to be primary.”⁶⁴

Clearly, Condorcet still has much to teach us today. His example is a scoff in the direction of conservative thinking that believes feminism is to the family what the atomic bomb is to peace. He shows us that men and women are not from different planets and that our potential for happiness is greatly increased when we realize we are not so unlike one another. Condorcet’s feminism informed his love for his wife, allowing him to not only desire her for her beauty, but also her reason and intellectual companionship. At a time when his contemporaries feared the rising influence of women and bemoaned not only the institution of marriage but also the very idea, Condorcet cultivated a lasting love that created a child, endured through the chaos of a revolution and even his own death; at a time when adultery and mistresses were as much a part of marriage as wedding gowns and vows of eternal fidelity, Condorcet shared a monogamous, mutually respectful relationship.

Furthermore, Condorcet’s example proves that feminism is not the bane of the family bond, but rather the potential glue for real love and partnership. He not only proves that men have as much to gain from feminism as women, he also bequeaths to men a legacy that makes feminism theirs, too. His model also challenges men to experience the full range of human experience and emotion. Furthermore, Condorcet challenges arm-chair scholarship, idle ideals, and democracy’s passive participants.

Feminism, as proven by Condorcet’s works and his example, has less to do with exalting woman over man as it does bringing the two closer together, to see that their similarities far outweigh any differences. The cause of feminism is, above all, simply the cause of human rights. Condorcet shows us that it is a cause equally belonging to men as to women. For women are not the only ones who stand to gain by the annihilation of gender prejudice—men do, too. From a young age men are forced into conventional roles that deny them the full range of human emotions. As evidenced by the growing number of stay-at-home fathers, women are not the only nurturers. Indeed, we are learning that one’s propensity for patience and parental care of a child has less to do with gender than individual preferences or tendencies that cut across the sexes. I feel particularly close to the issue since I dedicated four years of my life to care for my daughter Charlotte after her birth, as a stay-at-

⁶⁴ Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World” (31 July 2004, accessed 23, July 2007) ; available from http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20040731_collaboration_en.html ; Internet.

home father. Still, there are more atheists in the United States than there are stay-at-home fathers. The idea that a father should or could play the role of an infant's principle caretaker is viewed with suspicion and often accompanied by disgust for the mother's decision to work. Yet Condorcet, back in the eighteenth century, silences the mantra that women are predisposed, first and foremost, to the role of wife and mother. If women are perceived to be more nurturing or more caring than their husbands in general, it is only because their lives are more directly invested in such activities. To Condorcet, men and women were equally capable of being loving spouses and nurturing parents. Condorcet's model is a beacon for men who are increasingly uncomfortable with contemporary male stereotypes depicting man as a grunting, cussing, beer-drinking, strip-club-going simpleton. Just as woman is much more than a wife and mother, man is much more than an emotionless machine. In this way, one realizes the feminist cause, Condorcet's cause, is one that pushes for greater equality for women and demolishes the prejudices that deterministically define men and women by their sex. Feminism permits men and women to break conventional roles, allowing them to discover a lifestyle that best suits their individual needs and desires.

Finally, Condorcet speaks to the importance of not only thinking and theorizing, but also acting on one's ideas and ideals. Once he realized men and women were equal and, therefore, deserved to be treated as such, Condorcet spoke out and worked to change society as it stood then. Rebuffing those before and after him who excused inaction against injustice on the basis of the time not being right, Condorcet said "truth is a good thing" even when speaking it lays one bare to ridicule.⁶⁵ Moreover, he rooted truth in the soil of empathy and emotion, which made his nerves responsive to the pain and injustice of his fellow humans, whatever their race or gender. Whereas half-hearted feminists lacked the key component of compassion and continued to identify woman as "other," Condorcet was driven by not only truth but also sorrow and indignation.

⁶⁵ Condorcet, "Letters from a Freeman," 299.

