

## ***Sophia, Woman Not Inferior to Man***

The politics of the Enlightenment were quite often the politics of gender. Despite the importance of women in advancing much of the Enlightenment's agenda, eighteenth-century Europe remained very much a man's world. Women such as Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (see Reading 14) or Olympe de Gouges (see Reading 31), who wished to enter the professions of law or medicine or sought political equality, confronted enormous barriers because of their sex. Legal and medical authorities insisted that, with the exception of a few well-born women such as empresses and queens, most women were biologically and intellectually inferior to men and therefore should not be invested with higher learning or permitted to wield political power. Not surprisingly, in spite of its professed commitment to use reason to remedy social ills, few men of the Enlightenment were willing to consider the advancement of women's rights as a reasonable cause. Women who challenged this view quite often wrote under a pseudonym to protect their families from retribution or to avoid the personal abuse that so often accompanied the discussion of women's rights. The unknown author who wrote this essay under the pseudonym of "Sophia, a Person of Quality" might well have been Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, although the evidence remains inconclusive.

### **Whether Women Are Inferior to Men In the Intellectual Capacity, or Not**

There can be no real diversity contracted from the body. All diversity then must come from education, exercise, and the impressions of those external objects which surround us in different circumstances.

The same Creator, by the same laws, unites the souls of women and men to their respective bodies. The same sentiments, passions, and propensions cement that union in both. And the soul operating in the same manner in the one and the other is capable of the very same functions in both.

To render this more evident, we need only consider the texture of the head, the seat of the sciences, and the part where the soul exerts itself most. All the researches of anatomy have not yet been able to show us the least difference in this part between men and women. Our brain is perfectly like theirs, we receive the impressions of sense as they do, we marshal and preserve ideas for imagination and memory as they do, and we have all the organs they have and apply them to the same purposes as they do. We hear with ears, see with eyes, and taste with a tongue as well as they. Nor can there be any difference between any of our organs and theirs, but that ours are more delicate, and consequently fitter to answer the ends they were made for, than theirs.

Even among the men it is universally observed, that the more gross and lumpish are commonly stupid; and the more delicate are, on the other hand, ever the most sprightly. The reason is plain: The soul, while confined to the body, is dependent on its organs in all its operations; and therefore the more free or clogged those organs are, the more or less must the soul be at liberty to exert itself. Now it is too well known to need any support, that the organs in our sex are of a much finer, and more delicate temperature than theirs; and therefore, had we the same advantages of study allowed us which the men have, there is no room to doubt but we should at least keep pace with them in the sciences and every useful knowledge.

It can only then be a mean dastardly jealousy in them to exclude us from those advantages, in which we have so natural a right to emulate them. Their pretext for so doing, that study and learning would make women proud and vicious, is pitiful and capricious. No: false knowledge and superficial learning only can produce so bad an effect. For true knowledge, and solid learning must make women, as well as men, both more humble, and more virtuous. And it must be owned, that if a little superficial knowledge had rendered some of our sex vain, it equally renders many of theirs insupportable. But that is no reason why solid learning should be denied, or not instilled into, either; rather ought the greater pains to be taken to improve, in both, every disposition to the sciences into a true relish for, and the knowledge of, them: according to the advice of their brightest writers, as applicable to any science as to poetry. . . .