Women’s Rights and Women Writers

1. the emergence of “separate spheres” ideology and its significance

2. its critique by radical democrats
Women, Citizenship, and the French Revolution

The French Revolution greatly expanded ordinary people’s participation in public, political life; hundreds of new newspapers were published, censorship was abolished, and political clubs proliferated.

The 1791 Constitution (for France as a constitutional monarchy) distinguished between “active” and “passive” citizens. All citizens were protected by and subject to a single set of laws—this idea of “universal” law arising from naturally existing human “rights” was a clear break with the Old Regime system of “privilege” [private law]. Nonetheless, the National Assembly (1789-1791) also drew a clear distinction between those citizens who could be “active” in shaping the law, and those who were its “passive” beneficiaries.

An “active” citizen (i.e., one who could vote and potentially stand for office) had to be: an adult male with a permanent place of residence and a certain level of income. Wealth, property, age, and sex were all equally important attributes. The underlying logic was the idea that in order to take an active role in political life, citizens had to be “independent” (i.e., capable of making their own decisions on a rational, reasoned basis). It was assumed that anyone else (a poor man, a child, a woman, a migrant worker, etc.) was naturally dependent and hence incapable of thinking clearly for him/herself.

The 1792 elections (when France became a republic) extended the right to vote to all adult males (regardless of wealth) but women were not included.
Instead, French revolutionaries defined women’s role in public political life in domestic, familial terms. Women’s participation in the Republic was crucially important, but this participation was imagined in terms of “republican motherhood.”

Notice, for instance, that in this depiction of the Festival of the Supreme Being (June 1794), the man (wearing a Phrygian bonnet, the “red cap of liberty”) supports the woman as she directs the children’s attention to the allegorical figures. Women were important for the Republic because they would give birth to babies and raise good little French people, but it was assumed they could not do those things while also participating actively in public political life. During the most politically radical phase of the Revolution (1793-1794, or “Year Two”) the National Convention shut down all women’s political clubs.
The Idealization of Motherhood: a Domestic Revolution?

Today, we are often tempted to see the identification of women with motherhood and domesticity as a “traditional” or “conservative” world-view. However, it was in many ways something new in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Old Regime societies sharply marked the distinction between nobles and commoners, but were in some ways less preoccupied with gender difference. For eighteenth-century critics of absolutist monarchy, that noble women participated actively in court society was part of what was wrong with absolutism. Critics argued that women’s influence over political decision making (such as that exercised by Louis XV’s mistress, the marquise de Pompadour) was covert, sneaky, behind the scenes—it was political but it was not public. The monarchy’s critics argued that politics should all be public and that women should not be part of that political debate.

This sort of criticism was crucial for the emergence of what historians have called “separate spheres ideology.” This is the idea that men and women have “separate spheres” of influence.
“Separate spheres” was a widespread, middle-class ideal, central to how many in the nineteenth century imagined the world ought to be. But it was nowhere a full reality. Most working-class mothers could not afford to stay home with their children—instead, women and children alike went to work in the textile factories. In middle-class families, women (many of whom gave birth to ten or more children) worked very hard at home. A woman’s domestic labor was done for free, therefore allowing her husband’s income to reach that much further.
Separate Spheres: The Ideal

“It must ever be borne in mind that man’s love, even in its happiest exercise, is not like woman’s; for while she employs herself through every hour in fondly weaving one beloved image into all her thoughts, he gives to her comparatively few of his… His highest hopes and brightest energies must ever be expected to expend themselves upon the promotion of some favorite scheme, or the advancement of some public measure; and if with untiring satisfaction he turns to her after the efforts of the day have been completed … and comes back to pour into her faithful bosom the history of those trials which the world can never know… she will have little cause to think herself neglected.

… every married woman must make up her mind to be forgotten through the great part of the day; to make up her mind too, to many rivals for her husband’s attention. Among these, I would mention one, whose claim it is folly to dispute since no remonstrances on her part will ever render less attractive the charms of this competitor. I mean the newspaper…”

Sarah Stickney Ellis, The Wives of England, their Relative Duties, Domestic Influence, and Social Obligations (1843)—with a dedication to Queen Victoria (who, presumably, never interrupted Prince Albert when he was reading the newspaper).

For more on Ellis, see this website and her best-selling The Women of England
Separate Spheres: Colorful women and somber Men

in the eighteenth century, elite men and women had worn brightly colored clothes with lace and gold or silver trims;

during the revolutionary and Napoleonic wars, even civilian men began wearing clothes that looked more like a uniform

by the mid nineteenth century, women’s clothing was associated with rapidly changing fashion; men’s, with a more stable and sober aesthetic (dark and neutral colors, only minor changes from year to year)

1864 fashion plate

1869 fashion plate

Tissot, Balcony of the rue Royale cercle (1868)
Notice how this colored lithograph of the Paris Zoo (1860) depicts even wild animals as living in family homes.
Many historians have argued that separate spheres ideology was central to the creation of a distinct middle-class identity in nineteenth-century Europe. It did not work so well for the aristocracy, since a nobleman’s status (like that of a middle-class woman) depended largely on his not being obviously productive. Insofar as the idea of separate spheres ("the angel in the household") was a critique of the aristocracy, we might see it as a revolution against the eighteenth-century Old Regime. But this particular revolution was definitely a “double-edged sword.”

In nineteenth-century England, for instance, a woman lost her legal identity when she got married: a married couple had only one legal identity and that was the husband’s. Since a married woman was not legally a person, she could not own any property. Any money she made (wages, inheritance, investments, or gifts) belonged to her husband. Nor did she have any legal rights to her children—if her husband died, legal guardianship of minor children passed to his nearest living adult, male relative. Under French law at this same time, a man could divorce his wife on the suspicion of adultery (and simply receiving a letter from another man was enough to constitute a “suspicion of adultery”). On the other hand, a woman could only sue for a divorce if her husband actually kept his mistress in the family home.
Women’s Rights: early feminism in the revolutionary era

So far, I have suggested that we can see the emergence of separate-spheres ideology as an effect of the French and Industrial Revolutions. The critique of that ideology arose then as well…

While separate-spheres ideology stressed that women were *naturally* suited only to the private sphere of home and child rearing, early feminists (like Mary Wollstonecraft) suggested this only seemed to be the case because of how girls were raised and educated. (This structure of argument should sound familiar to you: those who advocated extending civil rights to France’s Jewish population made the same sort of claim: Jews were not bad by nature, they had only been made that way by the environment.) In the counter-revolutionary panic that gripped 1790s Britain (see Burke), Wollstonecraft’s demand that girls receive the same education as boys came to be seen as dangerous radicalism.

In the 1820s and 1830s, some socialists argued that transforming gender roles had to be central to changing society—but others stayed away from such positions, for fear of being seen as “too radical” and as attacking the family.
Women’s Rights and Chartism

Thousands of women were involved in Chartism (see this website for an introduction) but it would be a mistake to describe mainstream Chartism as a “feminist” movement. Chartists wanted working men to have the vote so that new members of Parliament could be elected and labor-friendly legislation passed. Many defined “labor-friendly” as establishing a living minimum wage and banning women from factory work. They said that women’s participation in the workforce was a sign of the unnatural conditions to which working people had been reduced by industrialization and falling wages. William Lovett, one of the leading Chartists, wrote: “A man must indeed have lost all self-respect to allow himself and his offspring to be dependent on his wife’s labour.”