 DOCUMENTS: THE ENLIGHTENMENT

1. As a period of intellectual history in Western civilization, the eighteenth century is known quite appropriately as the Enlightenment. At that time a group of thinkers, called the philosophes, developed and popularized related sets of ideas that formed a basis for modern thought. Their methods emphasized skepticism, empirical reasoning, and satire. They spread their ideas through works ranging from pamphlets to the great Encyclopedia and numerous meetings in aristocratic "salons." Although centered in France, this intellectual movement took place throughout Europe.

Most of the philosophes believed that Western civilization was on the verge of enlightenment, that reasoning and education could quickly dispel the darkness of the past that had kept people in a state of immaturity. The main objects of their criticism were institutions, such as the governments and the Church, and irrational customs that perpetuated old ways of thinking and thus hindered progress. While critical and combative, the philosophes were not political or social revolutionaries. Their ideas were revolutionary in many ways, but in practice these thinkers hoped for rather painless change - often through reform from above by enlightened monarchs. Enlightenment thinkers usually admired England, where liberal ideas and practices were most developed.


2. The source of man's unhappiness is his ignorance of Nature . . . He resembles a child destitute of experience, full of idle notions . . .

The most important of our duties, then, is to seek means by which we may destroy delusions which can never do more than mislead us. The remedies for these evils must be sought for in Nature herself . . . The enlightened man, is man in his maturity, in his perfection; who is capable of pursuing his own happiness; because he has learned to examine, to think for himself, and not to take that for truth upon the authority of others, which experience has taught him examination will frequently prove erroneous . . .

It necessarily results, that man in his researches ought always to fall back on experience, and natural philosophy: These are what he should consult in his religion - in his morals - in his pleasures - in his misfortunes. Experience teaches that Nature acts by simple, uniform, and invariable laws. It is by his senses man is bound to this universal Nature; it is by his senses that he must penetrate her secrets; it is from his senses he must draw experience of her laws . . .

Baron d'Holbach, *The System of Nature*
3. Let us suppose the mind to be . . . white paper, void of all characters, without any ideas. How comes it to be furnished . . . To this I answer, from experience . . . Our observation employed either about external sensible objects, or about the internal operations of our minds perceived and reflected on by ourselves, is that which supplies our understandings with all the material of thinking. These two are the fountains of knowledge, from whence all the ideas we have, or can naturally have, do spring.

John Locke, Essay Concerning Human Understanding

4. It cannot be denied that, since the revival of letters among us, we owe partly to dictionaries the general enlightenment that has spread in society and the germ of science that is gradually preparing men's minds for more profound knowledge. How valuable would it not be, then, to have a book of this kind that one could consult on all subjects and that would serve as much to guide those who have the courage to work at the instruction of others as to enlighten those who only instruct themselves . . .

Denis Diderot, Prospectus for the Encyclopedia of Arts and Sciences

5. Parisian women established the institution of the salon by the last quarter of the seventeenth century. Aspiring hostesses competed to attract the talented, the witty, and the powerful to their homes. Outside the powerful French court and often in opposition to it, these new social circles offered women a new possibility: that of being a salonière, who by her graciousness and skill allowed conversation to flourish, artists to find patrons, and aristocrats to be amused. As a salonière, a woman brought the circles of power into her home. In the environment she created, she could help or hinder not only artistic and literary reputations, but political policies as well. The financial remedies for France's economy were debated in the salons; the king's choices for ministers were strongly influenced by the backing of powerful salonières. Salonières were privy to court secrets; salons were frequented by statesmen and ambassadors as well as intellectuals and artists. Salonières could make or break careers and often provided havens for new political philosophies and the new political opposition to the monarchy . . . In the salon, a woman could meet and marry a man of superior social rank or wealth. In the salon, a woman of enterprise could make her way by attracting the famous . . .

Rational conversation, sociability between men and women, delight in the pleasures of this world are the hallmarks of Enlightenment culture. The men who mingled with the Bluestockings and frequented the salons were the men who produced the Enlightenment. It is a tragedy for women that these men, who were aided, sponsored, and lionized by the salonières, produced - with very few exceptions - art and writing which either ignored women completely or upheld the most traditional views of womanhood. Just as there was no Renaissance or Scientific Revolution for women, in the sense that the goals and ideals of those movements were perceived as applicable only to men, so was there no Enlightenment for women. Enlightenment thinkers questioned all the traditional limits on men - and indeed challenged the validity of tradition itself. They championed the rights of commoners, the rights of citizens, the rights of slaves, Jews, Indians, and children, but not those of women. Instead, often at great cost to their own logic and rationality, they continued to reaffirm the most ancient inherited traditions about
women: that they were inferior to men in the crucial faculties of reason and ethics and so should be subordinated to men. In philosophy and in art, men of the Enlightenment upheld the traditional ideal of women: silent, obedient, subservient, modest, and chaste. The salonière - witty, independent, powerful, well-read, and sometimes libertine - was condemned and mocked. A few Enlightenment thinkers did question and even reject subordinating traditions about women. But those who argued for a larger role for women . . . prompted outrage and then were forgotten. Instead, most philosophers and writers reiterated the most limiting traditions of European culture regarding women, often in works which condemned traditional behavior for men.

Bonnie Anderson and Judith Zinsser, *A History of Their Own*

6. When I see a watch . . . I conclude that an intelligent being arranged the springs of this mechanism so that the hand should tell the time. Similarly, when I see the springs of the human body, I conclude that an intelligent being has arranged these organs to be kept and nourished in the womb for nine months; that the eyes have been given for seeing, the hands for grasping . . .

Francois Marie Arouet (Voltaire), *Metaphysical Traits*

7. Almost everything that goes beyond the adoration of a Supreme Being and submission of the heart to his orders is superstition. One of the most dangerous is to believe that certain ceremonies entail the forgiveness of crimes. Do you believe that God will forget a murder you have committed if you bathe in a certain river, sacrifice a black sheep, or if someone says certain words over you?

Francois Marie Arouet (Voltaire), *Philosophical Dictionary*

8. The English constitution has, in fact, arrived at that point of excellence, in consequence of which all men are restored to those natural rights which, in nearly all monarchies, they are deprived of. These rights are, entire liberty of person and property; freedom of the press; the right of being tried in all criminal cases by a jury of independent men - the right of being tried only according to the strict letter of the law; and the right of every man to profess, unmolested, what religion he chooses . . . I will venture to assert that, were the human race solemnly assembled for the purpose of making laws, such are the laws they would make for their own security.

Francois Marie Arouet (Voltaire), *Philosophical Dictionary*

9. (Laws) should be in relation to the climate of each country, to the quality of its soil, to its situation and extent, to the principal occupation of the natives, whether husbandsman, huntsman,
or shepherds; they should have relation to the degree of liberty which the constitution will bear; to the religion of the inhabitants, to their inclinations, riches, numbers, commerce, manners, and customs.

Charles Louis Marie Secondat, baron de Brede et Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748)

10. The problem is to find a form of association . . . in which each, while uniting himself with all, may still obey himself alone, and remain as free as before. This is the fundamental problem of which the social contract provides the solution: the total alienation of each associate, together with all his rights, to the whole community . . . Each man, in giving himself to all, gives himself to nobody . . . Each of us puts his person and all his power in common under the supreme direction of the general will, and, in our corporate capacity, we receive each member as an indivisible part of the whole . . . In order that the social contract may not be an empty formula, it tacitly includes the undertaking, which alone can give force to the rest, that whoever refuses to obey the general will shall be compelled to do so by the whole body. This means nothing else than he will be forced to be free.


11. The conduct and manners of women, in fact, evidently prove that their minds are not in a healthy state; for, like the flowers which are planted in too rich a soil, strength and usefulness are sacrificed to beauty . . . One cause of this barren blooming I attribute to a false system of education, gathered from the books written on this subject by men who, considering females rather as women than human creatures, have been more anxious to make them alluring mistresses than affectionate wives and rational mothers. The understanding of the sex has been so bubbled by this specious homage, that the civilized women of the present century, with a few exceptions, are only anxious to inspire love, when they ought to cherish a nobler ambition, and by their abilities and virtues exact respect.

The most perfect education, in my opinion, is such an exercise of the understanding as is best calculated to strengthen the body and form the heart. Or, in other words, to enable the individual to attain such habits of virtue as well render it independent. In fact, it is a farce to call any being virtuous whose virtues do not result from the exercise of its own reason. This was Rousseau's opinion respecting men: I extend it to women, and confidently assert that they have been drawn out of their sphere by false refinement, and not by an endeavor to acquire masculine qualities. Still the regal homage which they receive is so intoxicating, that till the manners of the times are changed, and formed on more reasonable principles, it may be impossible to convince them that the illegitimate power, which they obtain by degrading themselves, is a curse, and that they must return to nature and equality.

Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792)
12. Woman, wake up: the tocsin of reason is being heard throughout the whole universe; discover your rights . . . Enslaved man has multiplied his strength and needs recourse to yours to break his chains. Having become free, he has become unjust to his companion . . . unite yourselves beneath the standards of philosophy; deploy all the energy of your character, and you will soon see these haughty men, not groveling at your feet as servile adorers, but proud to share with you the treasures of the Supreme Being . . . Marriage is the tomb of trust and love. The married woman can with impunity give bastards to her husband, and also give them the wealth which does not belong to them. The woman who is unmarried has only one feeble right; ancient and inhuman laws refuse to her the right to the name and the wealth of their father . . .

**Form For A Social Contract Between Man and Woman**

We, _________ and ________, moved by our own will, unite ourselves for the duration of our lives, and for the duration of our mutual inclinations, under the following conditions: We intend and wish to make our wealth communal, meanwhile reserving to ourselves the right to divide it in favor of our children . . . and that all of them without distinction have the right to bear the name of the fathers and mothers who have acknowledged them . . .

Moreover, I would like a law which would assist widows and young girls deceived by the false promises of a man to whom they were attached; I would like . . . this law to force an inconstant man to hold to his obligations or at least to pay an indemnity equal to his wealth . . . At the same time . . . prostitutes should be placed in designated quarters. It is not prostitutes who contribute the most to the depravity of morals, it is the women of society. In regenerating the latter, the former are charged . . .

Olympe de Gouge, *Declaration of the Rights of Women* (1791)